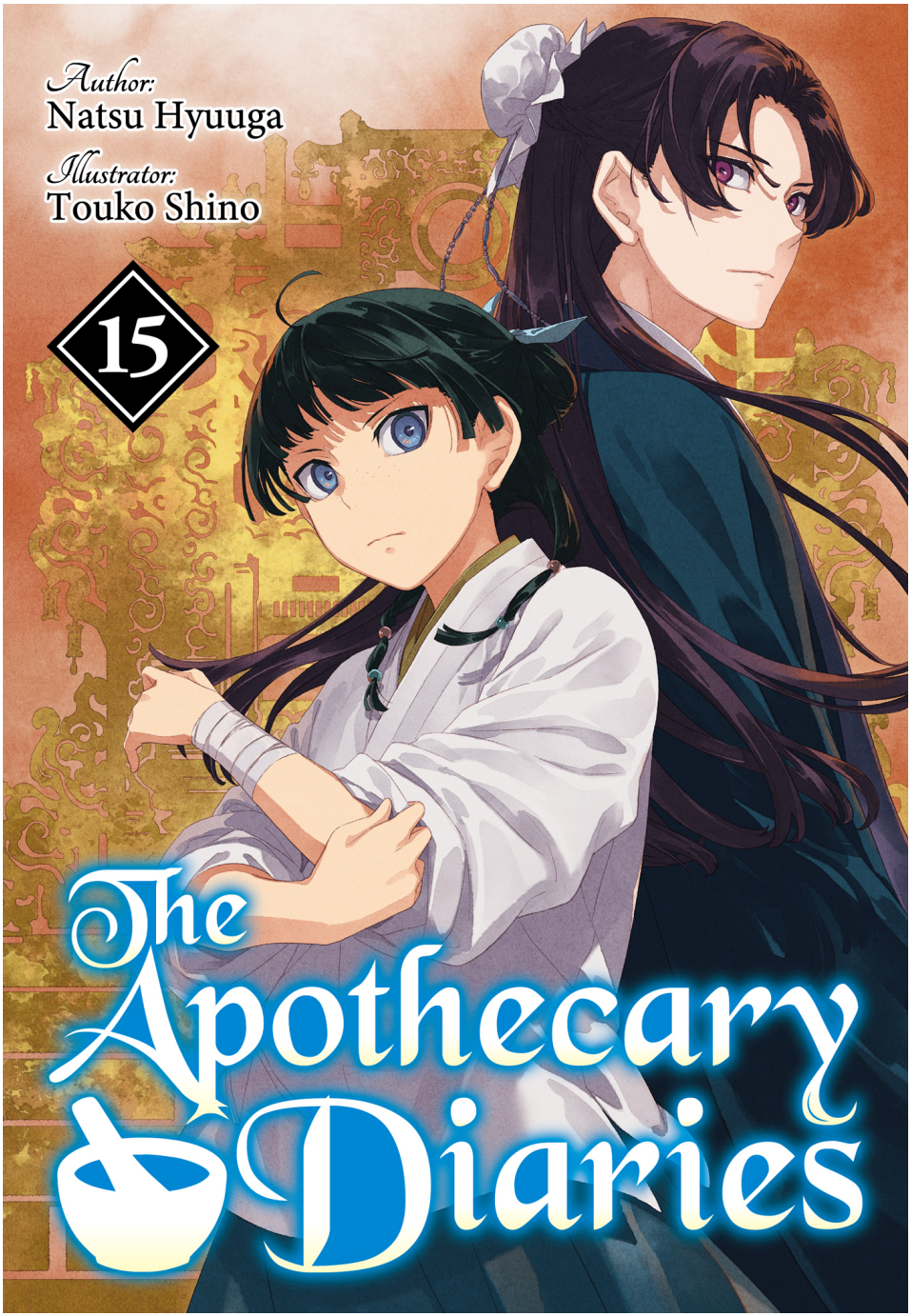

Author:
Natsu Hyuuga
Illustrator:
Touko Shino
15
The Apothecary Diaries

Table of Contents

Cover
Character Profiles

Chapter 1: The Selection Exam
Chapter 2: Smallpox and Chickenpox
Chapter 3: Reassignment
Chapter 4: Drug Trials
Chapter 5: A Book Restored
Chapter 6: The Patient
Chapter 7: A Man’s Romance
Chapter 8: Anesthesia
Chapter 9: To Everyone a Purpose
Chapter 10: Gyouyoh
Chapter 11: The Special Unit
Chapter 12: Explanation and Agreement
Chapter 13: Sowing Seeds
Chapter 14: The Patient’s Consent
Chapter 15: Confession—The Surface
Chapter 16: Confession—The Secret
Chapter 17: Anxiety
Chapter 18: Before the Surgery
Chapter 19: During the Surgery

Chapter 20: After the Surgery
Epilogue: Those Who Sow Malice

Introduction
Color Illustrations
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

Character Profiles

Maomao
A former pleasure-district apothecary. After a stint in the rear palace and then the royal court, she now finds herself an assistant to the medical office. Her current number one interest is Kada's Book. She despises her biological father, Lakan, but lately her distaste for Hulan has been through the roof. Twenty-one years old.

Jinshi
A young man as lovely as a celestial nymph, Jinshi is supposedly the Emperor's younger brother. He spent time in the rear palace masquerading as a eunuch; thinking of it now makes him so embarrassed that if a hole were available, he would crawl into it. Real name: Ka Zuigetsu. Twenty-two years old.

Basen
Gaoshun's son; Jinshi's attendant; duck aficionado. He and his sister Maamei are laying plans to get him married to former high consort Lishu. Twenty-two years old.

Chue
Wife of Gaoshun's son Baryou. A lady-in-waiting who seems to show up at the most unexpected times. She's good with people, though, so she gets along with her in-laws. Hates Hulan. Twenty-three years old.

Lahan's Brother
Older brother of Lakan's adopted son Lahan. He doesn't appear in this volume.

Lakan
Maomao's biological father and Luomen's nephew. A freak with a monocle. He and the Emperor seem to have quite a history.

Suiren
Jinshi's lady-in-waiting, former wet nurse, and grandmother.

Empress Gyokuyou
The Emperor's legal wife. An exotic beauty with red hair and green eyes. She's the mother of the Crown Prince, but because of her looks, many feel she's not fit for her office. Twenty-three years old.

Hongniang
Empress Gyokuyou's chief lady-in-waiting. So good at her job that the Empress is reluctant to let her go.

The Three Young Ladies Who Serve Empress Gyokuyou
Yinghua, Guiyuan, and Ailan by name. Former attendants of the Jade Pavilion who have always been kind to Maomao. They haven't changed much in the interim.

Yo
A newly recruited assistant in the medical office who has smallpox scars.

Changsha
A newly recruited assistant in the medical office. Lives in the same dorm as Maomao.

Tianyu
A young physician. A dangerous character who especially likes performing autopsies. A descendant of Kada.

Hulan
Gyokuen's grandson; Empress Gyokuyou's nephew. A member of the Gyoku clan, he'll stop at nothing to get what he wants, including killing his older brother. Currently serves as Jinshi's aide.

Maamei
Basen's older sister. Most formidable of the three Ma siblings.

Baryou
Basen's older brother; Chue's husband. Physically weak, he spends most of his time hidden behind a curtain.

Dr. Liu
An upper physician. He and Luomen go way back. He imparts stern instruction to Maomao and her friends.

Luomen
Maomao's adoptive father; a eunuch. He now serves as a physician to the court and rear palace. He goes way back with Dr. Liu.

Dr. Li
A middle physician. He went to the western capital with Maomao and the others, and the stuff he went through there really beefed him up.

The Emperor
Supposedly Jinshi's older brother. His facial hair may be prodigious, but it doesn't solve the many worries he has on Jinshi's account.

Gaoshun
The Emperor's milk brother; father of the three Ma siblings. He's hen-pecked and long-suffering, but he knows a side of the Emperor that few people see.

Ah-Duo
A former high consort, and Jinshi's real mother—she switched him with the Imperial younger brother when he was an infant. She's currently living out her life in a secluded villa.

Suirei
A survivor of the Shi clan; granddaughter of the former Emperor. Currently hidden in Ah-Duo's villa.

Chapter 1: The Selection Exam

The pounding sun was growing the slightest bit less intense; in this season, they could at least bear to work without rolling up their sleeves.

"Work's been getting a little easier lately, huh?" Maomao said.

"Yes, so it has," replied Dr. Li.

They were cleaning the break room together. It was normally not the kind of job someone of Dr. Li's status would have bothered with, but in his newly muscled state, he would do anything for some exercise. He even went out of his way to move the beds and clean under them. He probably didn't even care about cleaning—he was just here to work his muscles.

Work was "getting easier" because there were fewer fights among the soldiers. Maybe they had once again begun to recognize that the freak strategist was their common foe, or maybe their superiors had given them the evil eye.

Or maybe something that was causing the problem has been cleared up? Maomao thought. Whatever it was, she was grateful. Was Jinshi or someone like him responsible for taking care of it?

Boy, but the break room sure did get dirty fast. In addition to sometimes having injured or sick people rest there, the physicians used it to take naps. That was all well and good, but not so much the sticks left over from late-night snacks of meat skewers, or—she couldn't believe she was finding this—a naughty book that had clearly been passed around.

I remember using these as textbooks in the rear palace, she thought, thumbing through the pages and then leaving it on the table. If the book had an owner, he would presumably take it home with him; and if it didn't, well, someone might still take it home; and if no one claimed it, they would dispose of it.

"Whatcha got there? A little personal reading, Niangniang?"

Maomao involuntarily backed away from the voice. There was only one person who called her Niangniang.

"Yes, Dr. Tianyu? Can I help you?" she said.

“I never took you for the kind to read stuff like that, Niangniang.” He was thrilled to have found something to tease her about, but unfortunately for him, he didn’t realize that Dr. Li was standing right behind him.

“One of the *physicians* forgot it here,” Dr. Li said.

“Eeyikes!”

“‘Eeyikes,’ indeed! What kind of greeting is that?”

Tianyu’s face tensed when he saw Dr. Li, who was already preparing to bring down his knuckle.

“What’re you doing here, anyway? What happened to doing your work?” the doctor said.

“I did my work! Really, I swear I have a good reason to be here, so maybe we could skip the knuckle for today?” Tianyu clasped his head and tried to make himself as small as possible. He took most things in stride (*The wind is no enemy of the willow tree*, as the proverb went), but Maomao was tickled to find out that even he had a natural predator.

“So. What is this good reason?” As she spoke, Maomao flung herself into a chair, folded her legs indolently, and, just for good measure, scratched at her ear with a finger.

“You sound polite, but I don’t think you’re *being* polite,” Tianyu groused.

“It’s your imagination,” Maomao said, blowing on whatever had ended up on her finger.

“Maomao, it’s fine to ignore *most* of what Tianyu says, but he may have come with orders from above. We should hear him out, just to be sure,” Dr. Li said.

“Yes, sir.” If Dr. Li insisted, it wasn’t her place to refuse. She resigned herself to listening to Tianyu.

“There’s really a bright line between people you’ll listen to and people you won’t, isn’t there, Maomao?”

“It’s your imagination...sir.”

They moved from the break room to the physicians’ administrative office, where they found the elderly doctor checking over the daily reports.

“Dr. Liu is asking for Niangniang. May I borrow her?” Tianyu asked the older man; even he knew enough to mind his p’s and q’s around this physician.

“Tianyu and Maomao? Do you think this is about—?” The old doctor seemed to have some inkling as to why Maomao would have been summoned. “Sure, you can have her. Is she the only one?”

“If I brought Dr. Li, too, things would be all kinds of tough, wouldn’t they?” Tianyu replied lightly.

“True enough. Li here is very versatile. I’d be much obliged if you’d leave him with me.”

That sounded very portentous, but Dr. Li seemed as mystified as Maomao as to where she was going to go. “Are you sure I shouldn’t go along?” he asked not Tianyu, but the old physician.

“Yep.” It wasn’t the old physician who answered, but Tianyu.

“If you’re leaving Dr. Li with me, then fine. Go ahead and take Maomao.” The old doctor handed Dr. Li the reports.

Whatever the reason for this summons, Maomao was not much more eager than anyone else to spend time with Tianyu. “I think it should be Dr. Li who goes instead of Dr. Tianyu,” she said. “I humbly request he change with Dr. Li. We can leave Dr. Tianyu

here instead."

This was both her considered professional opinion and her knee-jerk personal one.

"Absolutely not. I have no use for Tianyu either," the old doctor said firmly.

"Ha ha ha! Boy, Dr. Li, you sure are popular," Tianyu said.

"And you don't seem to be much liked anywhere you go, Tianyu," said Dr. Li, as merciless as his colleague.

"What are we going to be doing?" Maomao asked.

"You know, no one told me much. They just said to be sure to bring you along, Niangniang."

Maomao and Tianyu both crossed their arms.

"Oh, it's nothing big. Just a simple test. If you don't pass, no harm done," the old doctor said, gazing out the window. "Now, I think you'd better get going."

"Yes, sir," Maomao said, and then she and Tianyu took their leave of Dr. Li and the elderly physician.

Dr. Liu's medical office was in the center of the palace grounds—it was located in the outer court, but close to His Majesty's bedchamber. Dr. Liu, however, was not there.

"You're looking for Dr. Liu? He's this way," said another physician, showing Maomao and Tianyu to another room.

It turned out they were not the only ones who had been summoned; quite a few other physicians were there. Everyone milled about, clearly uncertain why they had all been called.

Interestingly, there were even several women. Not Maomao's colleagues Yao and En'en—these women were older; one could call them middle-aged, but they didn't appear to be palace women as such.

Outsiders? That seems unlikely.

Whoever they were, their presence helped prevent Maomao from standing out like a sore thumb.

Her jaw dropped, however, when she saw who else was there—someone she never would have expected. A very elderly-looking physician with a bowed posture.

"Pops..."

Maomao's adoptive father, Luomen, was there. He was supposed to be the rear palace physician. Maomao trotted over to him.

"'Pops,' nothing!" he said. "Around here, you can call me... Hmm, let's see. Call me Dr. Kan."

"Yeah, but what are you doing here?"

"Again: Watch your tone. And be patient. You'll learn the answer soon enough."

I take it Pops knows perfectly well what we're all doing here.

Given the elderly physician's knowing comments, Maomao suspected the upper physicians had all talked this over to some degree or another.

"So what's goin' on?" Tianyu asked Luomen, trotting up behind Maomao.

"You'll find out any minute now. You can't expect me to explain it individually to every single one of you." Luomen worked his way to the far end of the room, his cane clicking against the ground as he went. There was a desk there, and behind it was Dr. Liu. Another of the upper physicians was with him, and they were talking about something.

Dr. Liu clapped his hands, cutting through the murmur of voices that filled the room. Everyone immediately fell silent. "It looks like you're all here. You must excuse the abrupt summons," he said. "Without further ado, we're going to divide you into three groups." He held up a paper so they could see it. Luomen and the other physician did the same. "I want each of you to go with the physician whose paper has your name on it."

Maomao hopped up and down, trying to get high enough to spot her name.

Yes!

It looked like she was in Luomen's group, the last name on the list. About ten other people also clustered around her father.

"I believe that's all of you. Come this way, please," he said, setting off with his cane clacking. Maomao skipped a little as she followed behind him. It crossed her mind to walk alongside him, but she thought better of doing that with all the doctors around, and attached herself to the back of the group instead. Another physician was helping Luomen, with his bad leg, along.

Luomen took them to another room, where there were desks with papers on them, enough for everyone.

It really is a test.

Maybe the unexpected summons had been a way of trying to catch them off guard. Everyone looked around, confused.

“Uh, sir?” said one of the physicians, raising his hand. “Why are we taking a test now?”

“You don’t have to take it if you don’t want to. If you’d rather leave, feel free—you won’t be punished, and no one will hold it against you.”

Luomen went and sat on a chair at the farthest end of the room, his cane clicking along with him.

The only kind of person I can think of who would go home when he said that would be a kid going through a rebellious phase.

The doctors looked at each other, then took their seats. Maomao sat at the last available desk.

“You have one hour. Let’s go ahead and get started,” Luomen said, lighting a stick of incense.

The test paper lay face down on the desk; Maomao turned it over and took a look. It consisted of about fifty questions regarding basic medical knowledge and another fifty about pharmaceuticals specifically. Given the one-hour time limit, she got the sense that they were expected to answer all the questions easily—these should be things they already knew.

Maomao began filling in answers, writing away without a break. A few of the doctors were sweating; occasionally someone would drop his brush or let out an audible groan—maybe they had written a word incorrectly.

“All right, time’s up,” Luomen said. The hour had passed in the blink of an eye. Maomao hadn’t even had time to double-check her answers, but at least she had filled everything in. That was a good start. Some of the physicians’ shoulders slumped. It was rough when you knew you could have answered more of the questions if you’d had more time.

Once Luomen was sure that the incense stick was out completely, he stood up. “All right, on to the next location.”

He started walking, and where should he lead them but the medicine storage room.

The storage room was packed with medicine cabinets. Maomao came all the time on official duties, but no matter how often she was here, it never failed to excite her.

Okay, got to take a deep breath.

She breathed in, savoring the room’s distinctive smell.

Now that I think about it...

She began to register the faces of the assembled physicians. She

didn't recognize all of them, but several were often assigned to manage the medicines in this room just like she was. Given the content of the written examination they had just taken, she was starting to think that this group was full of people who were very experienced with medicinal herbs.

So would that mean Tianyu's group is surgery?

Tianyu was a gifted surgeon, if nothing else (including a decent human being).

"What should we do next, sir?" one of the physicians asked.

"Well, let's see. Perhaps I could ask each of you to make a few medicines?"

"Yes, sir."

The doctors were trying to reset themselves.

"The patient is a twenty-year-old woman. Her husband has come to you saying that she hasn't been able to sleep, possibly because of gastritis. What kind of medicine would you use to treat her?"

Several of the physicians sprang into action. Some went scrambling for ingredients; others, perhaps depressed by their performance on the written test, only seemed to be going through the motions of making medicine.

But Maomao and three of the doctors didn't move.

We'd only trip over each other by crowding the cabinets at the same time. There are plenty of ingredients; we won't run out.

The three doctors, like Maomao, were people who had been assigned to manage the medicine cabinets. They didn't have to rush; they knew exactly what was in each drawer and could afford to take their time.

Tall Senior, Short Senior, and Mid-Height Peer, Maomao thought, assigning each of them an arbitrary name. Well, not completely arbitrary: One of her seniors was tall, the other was short, and the physician who had joined the staff at the same time she had was of average stature. Each of them more or less did their own thing, so they had never really gone out of their way to introduce themselves to each other, but they knew each other by sight.

The doctors who had gone into action first had begun to assemble their ingredients from the panoply of cabinets. Maomao looked over the drugs that had been gathered on the table.

Longan and tohki, licorice, gardenia... Are we dealing with something to combat anemia and poor sleep?

A few of the physicians had chosen slightly different ingredients, but they were all making roughly the same thing.

"You're not going to do anything?" Luomen asked Maomao and the others who had stood still.

"If we all rushed the cabinets at once we'd only trip over each other, sir," said her tall senior colleague.

Her shorter senior narrowed his eyes and asked, "Does the patient have any other symptoms?"

Are we allowed to ask that?

"Symptoms," Luomen echoed. "What kind of symptoms did you have in mind?"

"Does this person have morning sickness?" Maomao asked pointedly. A twenty-year-old woman, with her husband making the inquiry? One had to consider the possibility of pregnancy. There were plenty of drugs that could help with insomnia, but many of them could have negative effects on the pregnancy.

The other physicians who had stayed behind seemed to have had the same intuition as Maomao.

That doesn't mean that the other doctors are incompetent or anything.

The vast majority of the patients they would see in the court were men. Even when a palace lady got sick, she often preferred to hide that fact rather than present herself at the medical office, and if she was pregnant, she would probably just leave court service altogether. Luomen had presented them with a trick question, one that required them to take a step beyond their experience as court physicians.

"Well, let's see... The husband reported nausea, so I think it would be wise to consider the possibility."

Only then did Maomao and the other three finally move. The doctors who had gone first were starting to show Luomen the results of their efforts—and he was telling them they had failed. One of them did pass, but he didn't seem very happy about it; maybe his results on the written test hadn't been so good.

The remaining four, including Maomao, gathered roughly the same kinds of herbs and made similar drugs. They each had their own particular way of going about it, but they came up with more or less the same thing.

Time was short, however, and Mid-Height Peer looked a bit rushed. Or maybe he was all too aware of the other doctors, the

ones who had failed, watching them as they worked.

"Good, you three have the right answer. This one... Perhaps prepare it with a little more care," Luomen said.

Only Mid-Height Peer was rejected—he hadn't had time to mix the ingredients properly.

"Yes, sir. I'll work faster," he said, disappointed but willing to acknowledge where he had gone wrong.

"Now, let's move on to the next problem," Luomen said.

He had them make several more medicines in much the same way. It was very characteristic of him to see what they could make on their own, rather than simply handing them a recipe and asking them to mix it.

And he does love to set little traps.

It was somewhat mischievous, yes, but then, patients often had trouble explaining their own symptoms clearly. Luomen was conveying that it was good to be prepared to question what the patient told them.

If only he was this careful about money, Maomao thought. He'd been officially hired as a physician, so she *assumed* no one was taking a cut of his rear-palace salary, but maybe she would ask when she got a chance, just to be sure.

I can, however, totally imagine him giving everything he owns to some random person in trouble that he passed by.

Which meant that if he never took a step outside of court, everything should be fine... Right?

Maomao let these thoughts parade through her head as she made the medicine for the next problem. Luomen went around observing not only their herbal knowledge, but also the ways in which they made their medicines. It was about more than what components one chose; it was how you handled them, how you mixed them together.

He told us no one was required to take this test...

But Maomao was very curious what task they would be put to if they passed.

"Next, hmm... Perhaps you could see how much you can make within the given time. Use the ingredients listed here."

Luomen was upping the difficulty.

Maomao looked at the formula and raised her hand. "Sir?"

"Yes?"

"What would be the point of making so much of this medicine?

We would never be able to use all of it."

If they were going to ask her to waste precious medicinal herbs, Maomao was going to say something about it.

"I agree with her," Short Senior said. The medicine they were being asked to make was a concoction for stomachaches, but considering how much of that they went through in a day, this was far too much. The herbs that served as the basis for this medicine could also be used in other drugs, so it was no good to burn through them making a bunch of the same medicine.

"Couldn't we make something for wounds? Something we could use on the soldiers?" Maomao asked. The other physicians agreed with her.

"The medicine won't go to waste," Luomen assured her. "It will be distributed to patients in town."

"Sir... What does that mean?" asked Mid-Height Peer. The other doctors likewise began to murmur among themselves.

"It's in order to investigate the effects of a new medicine we'll be making. We've gathered a group of patients with similar symptoms to make it easy to compare them."

It was like a more precise version of the experiments Maomao had been performing on her left arm.

Silently, she looked over the formula they'd been given once more. Winter melon seed, rhubarb root, *mu dan pi*...

Something for circulation?

Just what kind of patients had they gathered? And what kind of medicine were they trying to develop?

"Today's tests are about deciding who will be involved in administering the medicine. The tests, incidentally, are now over. You may all go home. You'll be notified soon whether you passed or not."

Carrying their answer sheets, Luomen left the room.

The test takers all looked at each other, mystified, and then began to filter out.

Guess I'll go too.

Maomao was about to do just that when someone caught her shoulder.

"Hey, you."

It was one of the other test takers—the one doctor out of the early birds who had passed the first medicine-making test. Maomao had never been in the same office as him, but she'd seen his face

somewhere.

"Do you know about Suirei?" he demanded.

"Suirei... Oh!"

Years ago, there had been a physician who had been in love with Suirei. She'd used him like a pawn when she'd made her "resurrection drug" and fled the palace.

He was entrusted with looking after the medicine supply before.

Now he was assigned somewhere else, presumably demoted after what had happened with Suirei. Was it just luck that he and Maomao had never run into each other so far, or was somebody politely keeping them apart?

"When you say Suirei, do you mean what she's doing now?"

"That's right."

"I have no idea."

"Is that the truth?"

Hell no, it's not.

But she had to lie to him.

For outward purposes, Suirei was someone who could not exist. She was a member of the Shi clan and a granddaughter of the former emperor. She'd been involved with "accidents" and murders of several VIPs, and had even abducted Maomao. The moment anyone learned she was alive, she might be headed to the gallows.

Thus, no matter how cold it seemed, Maomao had to be firm. "If I ever find out where she is, I'll be obligated to tell someone. I'd probably even collect a nice reward for it."

Suirei was a suspect in a whole range of cases. Even this doctor had to know that she would never be safe if she were found.

After a long moment, he said, "All right." Then he left the room, shoulders slumped.

Do yourself a favor and forget about her, Maomao thought, putting a hand to her chest in relief.

Chapter 2: Smallpox and Chickenpox

The day after the test, Maomao was taking stock of their inventory as usual.

Why would they handpick people to do drug trials? she wondered.

It was her fault for pondering while she worked.

"Yikes!"

She was so distracted by her ruminations that she almost knocked over a jar full of medicine. She was saved by Yo, who had come to help her and luckily was standing nearby. She propped the jar up and prevented catastrophe.

"Phew... Sorry about that. Thanks for the help," Maomao said.

"Is something on your mind?" Yo asked.

Yo was the taller of the two palace ladies who had recently joined the service. She was assigned to a different place from Maomao, but frequently came to her to learn how to mix or preserve herbs and medicines. She was a quick study, and Maomao enjoyed having a student who rose to her teaching.

"Oh, nothing much," she said now, trying to energize herself with a slap on the cheeks.

Still, she couldn't quite get the thought out of her head. Just then, she happened to catch sight of Yo's long sleeves. "I realize this isn't very polite, but may I make a request of you?" she said.

"Yes? What?"

"Would you show me your smallpox scars?"

Yo's arm was covered with small welts from smallpox. An outbreak of the disease had destroyed her village.

Yo looked dubious for a moment, but then she rolled up her sleeves. Her arms were covered in small scars like tiny red beans.

"Are they that unusual?" she asked.

"No, but I've never had the chance to examine smallpox scars up close," said Maomao. Some of the customers at the apothecary shop had had them, but no one had been eager to show them off. Maomao knew very well that it was not a nice thing to ask for.

"Are the scars only on your arms?" she asked.

“No, I have some on my shoulders and neck as well. But a lot fewer than some other people.”

“You think that’s thanks to Kokuyou’s treatment?”

“Yes,” Yo said simply.

Kokuyou had highly visible smallpox scars on his face, but he was surprisingly cheerful in spite of it. He had been a doctor in Yo’s village, and although he acted awfully frivolous, Yo trusted him implicitly.

“This treatment—what exactly did he do to you?” Maomao had heard some sort of explanation before, but she wanted to be sure.

“He made a wound on my skin and rubbed powder made from an old scab into it. I’ve heard you can also inhale the powder through your nose, but he didn’t have enough for that.”

“Hoh, hoh.” Maomao nodded; this was definitely worth asking for details. “How bad were your symptoms after the treatment?”

Yo crossed her arms and closed her eyes. “Let’s see... I got a pretty serious fever, but the blisters didn’t spread all over my body. Most of the other kids who got the same treatment had similar symptoms, or maybe slightly milder. A few of them hardly had any blisters at all, and their fevers went down after a few days.”

“So there are significant variations among individuals.” Maomao looked for a notepad so she could write all this down. Yo insisted it wasn’t worth it, but Maomao wanted to make sure she remembered.

“Yes, pretty significant, I’d say. It depends somewhat on each person’s physical size, but I suspect it mostly has to do with the amount of the toxin they were exposed to. You’re working with scabs, right? So it’s hard to make sure everyone gets exactly the same amount.”

Maomao *hmm*ed and crossed her arms. Yo was intelligent: She could speak objectively while including elements of her own observations and suppositions.

“What happened to the people Kokuyou didn’t treat?” Maomao asked.

“My father had had smallpox before, so he just had a minor fever. Everyone who was strong enough left the village when the outbreak began. The only villagers left were my family and a few children. Oh, and one adult survived. Everyone else was killed.”

So it wasn’t the case, evidently, that once you had smallpox, you could never get it again.

“That’s terrible,” Maomao said. “What did you do with the bodies?”

“We burned them and then buried the bones,” Yo said after a moment of hesitation. “And the houses.”

Smallpox could spread just through old scabs. Simply burying the bodies would have been too dangerous. Yet some considered burning a corpse to be blasphemous; doing so must have taken no small amount of courage.

“That’s when all of you came to the capital together.”

“No, not all of us. The one other surviving adult outside my family went somewhere else. But I want you to know that we were careful to disinfect our clothing before we came into the city, and to be sure that we had completely healed.”

She wanted to emphasize that she had not brought plague into the royal capital.

“I know,” Maomao said. “And I won’t tell anyone about what you did with the corpses.” She was starting to think that she would have to interrogate Kokuyou a bit further about smallpox treatment.

I can check with Pops too.

There were plenty of other capable doctors around as well. The older ones might remember something about that outbreak of smallpox.

With all this chatting, Maomao suddenly discovered they were done with their work. “I’m going to take the medicine you’ve made —come with me, please,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

They would leave the commonly used medicines at the medical office. “We might encounter some rough customers, but just stick with me. Don’t let them see that you’re afraid, no matter what they say to you,” Maomao told Yo.

Maomao’s office was near the training grounds where the soldiers practiced, which meant there were a lot of, in her words, rough customers. Yo might still be a bit countrified, but Maomao couldn’t have anyone laying a hand on her dear younger colleague.

As they passed by the young men, the soldiers shot them appraising glances. Yo stiffened slightly; Maomao trotted along as if nothing were happening.

When they arrived at the medical office, the elderly doctor was chasing out a soldier who’d come in with a graze. “You call that an injury? That’s nothing. Get out of here!” He might look like a

grandfatherly old man, but he was an experienced hand in this office and was used to things getting a little mean.

"Couldn't you have just slapped some salve on it to put his mind at ease?" asked Dr. Li, who as a fellow bodybuilder had some sympathy for the soldier.

"I cleaned the injury," the old doctor shot back. "Look, that was the guy who was guffawing about breaking one of the other men's arms the other day. If he thinks he deserves kid gloves, he's going to find all I have for him is some spit and polish."

"Ahh, one of those gutless wonders, eh? I daresay you should have rubbed salt in the wound to disinfect it," said Dr. Li, who sounded more like a musclebrain every day.

"I have medicines to deliver," said Maomao, entering the office and taking off her portable medicine cabinet.

"Delivery's here," Yo echoed, imitating Maomao.

"Well, well, what a sweet young thing you've brought with you today," said the elderly doctor.

"My name is Yo," she told him. "I just started this year." Evidently this was the first time they had met.

"We don't get a lot of young ladies around here. Too many rough-and-tumble types."

"*I'm* here," Maomao said stiffly.

"You and Miss Chue are special cases. In flower terms, I would say you're an obako and a dandelion."

So she was in the same category as Chue now?

Dr. Li and the elderly physician were both relatively decent toward young women, so Maomao didn't worry about having Yo there. If anything, it made her acutely aware that those in charge must have been thinking the same thing when they assigned Maomao to this office.

That was enough chitchat as far as Maomao was concerned. She resumed her delivery.

"When you deliver new medicines, check the date on any medicines left over," she told Yo. "Put the ones with the oldest date on top, and if they're too old, throw them out."

These deliveries were regular affairs, so they didn't throw too much out. Unlike the rear palace medical office, this was a proper place of business.

I wonder how the quack doctor is doing, Maomao thought.

Luomen was there now, so the rear palace medical office was

probably running smoothly. If Maomao had any concerns, they were mostly for the quack doctor's job. It appeared Luomen had been given some new task, however, and Maomao did worry a little bit about how things would go from here.

She noticed there were no injured patients around at that moment, so without slowing in her work, she decided to broach the subject she'd been wondering about. "Have either of you physicians ever had smallpox?"

Yo looked mildly shocked, but she didn't stop refilling the medicine.

"The pox? Doesn't everyone get that?" Dr. Li asked.

"I think you're thinking of something else," Maomao replied. He was probably imagining not smallpox, but chickenpox. Most people did get chickenpox when they were children. Maomao wasn't much clearer on the distinction than Dr. Li was, but smallpox brought you a lot closer to death.

"I have," said the elderly physician, rolling up one of his sleeves to reveal a red pattern on his arm, visible among the spots on his skin. The marks on his arm were much denser than those on Yo's.

Presumably he was only so willing to show his scars because he'd had the disease a long time ago, and everyone in this room understood that he was no longer contagious. Dr. Li, just like Maomao and Yo, looked impassively.

"You're not afraid?" the elderly doctor asked Yo.

"No, sir. I know I can't catch it from you."

"That saves me having to explain, then. Excellent." The physician was relieved by Yo's attitude. Maomao suspected Yao had long ago chased out any palace ladies who would have quailed at the sight.

"Judging by the extent of your scars, it looks like it was a serious case," Maomao said.

"I suppose so. They cover half my back as well. It's not that rare among people of my generation. It was going around at the time, you see. But my first wife looked askance at it."

"First" wife, huh?

"What about the second?" Maomao asked promptly.

"She's a good woman. She's at home, watching over our great-grandchild."

"Wait...are you feeling lovey-dovey?" Maomao said. The elderly physician only smiled and rolled down his sleeve. "If you'll forgive

me saying so, sir, I'm impressed you survived."

"That's fair. At first, we thought it was just chickenpox, but then the symptoms grew more serious. If I hadn't come from a family of doctors, I'm sure I would have died."

"I'm afraid I don't really understand the difference between chickenpox and smallpox," said Dr. Li, and Maomao nodded.

"Yes, well, they do look very similar, although one is much deadlier than the other. I've heard some suggest that the toxins that cause those two diseases must be somehow similar, but not exactly the same."

The elderly physician opened a desk drawer and took out some tea candies, looking for a little break. He offered them to Maomao and the others; Maomao for one accepted them gratefully. Yo looked hesitant, but since this was a venerable old doctor encouraging her to partake, she couldn't really say no.

It was only because the factional fighting among the soldiers had calmed down that they were able to enjoy a quiet snack time like this.

"The toxins that cause those diseases," Maomao breathed.

"Maomao, don't get any ideas about *trying* them," Dr. Li said.

"Of course not, sir," she answered, albeit slowly, and averted her eyes.

"Not everyone is happy to see smallpox scars, but as a physician, they can have certain advantages," the elderly doctor said. "For one thing, it shows you the terror of illness firsthand, and for another, it makes it harder for you to catch the same disease."

"Yes, sir." The response came not from Maomao, but from Yo. For her, the elderly physician might have seemed a savior of a kind.

I'm glad I brought this up while she was around, Maomao thought.

She'd known, at least, that these were not people who would take smallpox lightly; she would never have raised the subject in front of anyone who was likely to make fun of the scars.

"Then again, as you rise through the ranks, it can be a liability," the elderly doctor went on. "If you have two physicians with the same qualifications, setting aside any noble background, they'll take the one with fewer scars."

Maomao was silent at that. Presently, Dr. Liu was the one in charge of the physicians. He was an excellent doctor, no doubt, but considering their ages, this old man could easily have outranked him. One presumed there were no issues with his abilities or his

family background.

Maomao and the others began to feel a bit uncomfortable.

“Well, my dear Liu is a clever man, more gifted than I am, so there’s no problem there. I think I would be too frightened to be His Majesty’s personal physician.”

“His Majesty’s personal physician… I agree, I don’t have the stomach for it. I wouldn’t, no matter how many stomachs I had!” Dr. Li said.

Personal attendant to the Emperor, huh?

They were right; that was a job Maomao would never want. It brought honor with it, certainly, but even more, it brought responsibility. If the Emperor should fall sick or, heavens forbid, die, his physician might well pay with his life. Indeed, Luomen had suffered physical mutilation on account of a medical case involving the Imperial family.

I just hope they wouldn’t punish him again now that they’ve called him back…

Maomao sighed as she poured some tea.

“Oh, yes, that’s right,” the old doctor said, standing up and taking an envelope from atop his desk. “This came for you, Maomao.”

“You, er, don’t think you should have given this to me first thing?”

“My mistake. Us old folks can be so forgetful.”

Maomao took the packet. On the front in large letters was written *NOTICE OF REASSIGNMENT*.

Chapter 3: Reassignment

Specifically, it turned out, Maomao was being moved to another office. Her new workplace was the largest medicine-storage area in the palace. When she got there, she found others who had been reassigned as well—mostly the ones she expected.

"I haven't seen you since...yesterday," she said.

"No, not since yesterday."

The other new faces were the three people who looked after the supplies, just like Maomao did: Tall Senior, Short Senior, and Middle-Height Peer.

"I was so sure I'd failed," Middle-Height Peer said with some amazement. Luomen had criticized his preparation of the medicine during the test the day before.

At exactly the time stipulated on their orders, Luomen walked into the room. An assistant came in beside him, which was at least a sign that they were taking care of him.

"Now then, you're the ones who passed yesterday's test. We're going to have you get right to work." He set down a formula for a medicine. "For now, I'd like you to make some of this."

With that, Maomao and the others found themselves furiously mixing herbs together for the next several days.

Grind, grind griiind, thought Maomao. She'd spent so many days mixing medicine that she thought she was going to get calluses from the mortar and pestle.

I mean, it's okay. I'm having a good time.

The exact composition of what Maomao and the others were being asked to make changed sometimes, but all of the recipes used roughly the same components: antiseptics, drugs to make the blood flow better, and anti-inflammatory agents.

I do wish we could work on a wider variety. That was just her personal desire, however, so she kept it to herself.

"What in the world do you think we're making?" asked the doctor of average height. He was still young, not much different

from Maomao. A few years past twenty, she guessed. He seemed to be from Tianyu's intake; she sometimes saw them talking together.

"Various ratios of rhubarb root and mu dan pi," said one of the others. A medicine that would promote blood flow.

Luomen acted as teacher and guide to the three physicians and Maomao; today, he would be coming after stopping by the rear palace's medical office.

"What's the other stuff?" asked Middle-Height Peer, who knew the least of any of them, but was at least proactive about it.

"Licorice and garden peony—it must be a decoction of the two," answered Tall Senior, the taller of the two seniors. Typically, Tall Senior would go out of his way to answer questions, while the more vertically challenged Short Senior would only offer an opinion if something annoyed him.

"I agree," Maomao said. "It's a drug to suppress muscle spasms."

"And pain. It helps with back and abdominal pain," snapped Short Senior.

"When a patient's abdomen hurts, it can be used to help figure out exactly where the pain is," Tall Senior explained.

I thought it had circulatory applications, but it's a digestive drug?

A draught of rhubarb root and mu dan pi could be helpful in cases of constipation or stomachache and was frequently dispensed to women, as it also helped regulate periods.

Wonder what disease this is? Maomao thought, but she figured that when they saw the patients who were going to take the drug, they would find out.

Meanwhile, Luomen, of course, would not miss this opportunity to help them learn to think for themselves.

No sooner had Luomen finally shown up than he said, "We'll go to deliver the medicine now. Everyone come with me." There was a carriage waiting outside; clearly, they were expected to do as they were told.

They rode along for thirty minutes until they arrived at a mansion on the outskirts of the capital. Well, a big house, anyway; it wasn't really elaborate enough to be called a mansion. It was situated in a residential area, but surrounded by gardens so that no one could see inside.

"Bring the cargo," Luomen said, and the three physicians did so.

There wasn't that much of it, so Maomao stood with Luomen and helped him to walk. Evidently his assistant wasn't with him at all times.

Don't mind us, she thought as she came into the house.

The moment she entered, she caught the distinct aroma of medicine. A man wearing a white apron came out to meet them. "I've been waiting for you," he said.

"I've brought the medicine, along with some helpers. I have to explain to them what's going on, so please, go back to your work."

"Yes, sir," the man said and went away.

"Helpers?" Maomao asked. "What does that mean?"

"Just what you think. Or don't you wish to look after patients?"

"That's not what I meant," she said, unsure how she should have asked the question.

Maybe I should have asked why we're doing this…or who for. She wasn't sure if it was safe to ask that, however, so she just followed Luomen.

Far inside the house was a room full of cots. The patients were all men, ranging from their teens into their forties. Folding screens had been set up between the beds to give a modicum of privacy. There must have been nurses or caretakers of some kind, because the bedding and the nightclothes the men wore looked clean.

Their pallor is poor, and there are buckets by the beds. Vomiting?

The patients appeared to come from all walks of life. The ones with gnarled hands and legs and tanned skin might be farmers. The ones with knobs on their fingers, maybe scribes. They didn't seem to have any one thing in common except for their gender.

But then, they're all taking part in a medical trial.

It meant they weren't exactly affluent.

There were other people walking around in white aprons—medical personnel, perhaps.

"We brought the medicine," Luomen said to one of the men who looked like staff.

"Thank you very much."

"Since we're here, I thought we might check the stores. All right with you?" Luomen asked.

"Yes, please. If you'd be so kind," the man replied.

Luomen led Maomao and the others to the place where the medical supplies were kept, next to the galley. Two medicine cabinets sat there, still new.

“I’ll parcel out the medicine. Would you hand it to me?” Luomen asked.

“Yes, sir.”

The medicine was already divided into single doses in paper packets. Luomen proceeded to put them smartly into the cabinet drawers.

Not much for us to do, Maomao thought. The three physicians didn't foist any random chores on her, so it was all too easy for her to find herself with time to kill. She filled some of it by taking a good look around.

The place looked like it had been an ordinary residence that had been hurriedly converted into a clinic. It was full of familiar tools: mortars and pestles, sifters and dispensing spoons.

Are they making medicine here too? Maomao sniffed. *It doesn't smell much like medicine. It smells…almost sweet.*

Still sniffing, she stepped down to the area where the floor was made of exposed dirt. She saw a stove, on top of which sat a pot with dark, viscous liquid inside.

Refined honey?

This was honey with the water removed, and it would be formed into pills—except that she didn't see any of the herbs with which it would normally be mixed. Instead she saw wheat flour and buckwheat flour, perfectly ordinary baking supplies.

"Buckwheat flour…"

Maomao stepped gingerly away from the bag full of flour and put a handkerchief over her nose. She had difficulty breathing whenever she ate something with buckwheat in it; she certainly didn't want to inhale the stuff.

"Maomao! Don't go fiddling with things. Come back over here," Luomen said.

"Yes, sir," Maomao answered. Her father sounded a touch panicked, maybe because he knew there was buckwheat flour around. When he saw the handkerchief over her mouth, his face showed that he realized he was too late.

There were a lot of other odd things as well. For example, the two medicine cabinets had exactly the same shape and arrangement. Each had the names of the medicines written on the drawers, but every drawer in both cabinets appeared to contain exactly the same things.

So why would they bother to have two cabinets?

Just as Maomao was wondering about this, one of the men in an apron came up.

"It's almost time to give them their medicine," he said.

"Of course; I see," Luomen replied and stepped away from the

cabinets. The man took five doses of the medicine they had just replenished. Then he took five more from the other cabinet—of exactly the same thing.

Maomao wasn't the only one who found this strange. "Dr. Kan," said Tall Senior, raising his hand. "May I inspect the contents of the other cabinet?"

"Go ahead," Luomen said.

With his approval, Tall Senior took a packet from the second cabinet and opened it. Maomao and the other physicians crowded around to look.

"You keep your distance, Maomao," Luomen said, and she backed off. The pills in the packet were of a brown color; if she squinted, she could see black specks in them. "Is that...buckwheat flour?" she asked.

"One presumes that's one of the ingredients."

The pill was made of wheat and buckwheat flours and dyed to make it look like medicine—but it wasn't.

"So this cabinet has *fake* medicine that doesn't do anything?" Middle-Height Peer said in some distress.

"Keep your voice down," Luomen warned him.

"But sir! Why would you do such a thing?!"

"Think it through and see if you can't tell me."

When Luomen told you to think, there was nothing for you to do but think. He only asked questions that could be answered, with enough consideration. If you couldn't come up with the response, it only meant that you had missed some information somewhere.

Earlier, that man took five packets out of each cabinet. There are ten patients, which means the medicine is being divided in half.

The patients were shown a certain level of hospitality while being treated here. They were probably getting decent food, for one thing.

You make sure everyone is in the same environment to judge the effect of the medicine.

It was always possible that the medicine wasn't what was helping, but simply being in a clean environment and getting proper nutrition. In that case, you couldn't always be sure the medicine was working, and that was no good. So it was necessary to prepare two separate groups.

"You've figured it out, Maomao?"

"Yes, sir."

“And what do you think?”

The three physicians all turned to hear her answer.

“I think you’ve divided them into two groups to ascertain the effect of the medicine while ruling out the effect of changes in environment or diet. You want to see if people in the same environment with the same illness will show different results based on whether they receive medicine or not.”

Luomen was smiling, but he didn’t look quite convinced.

“Further, the reason you deliberately prepared some medicine that will presumably work and some placebos is—”

“Thank you, that’s enough. There’s someone else who looks like they can give us an answer. Let’s hear it from them.”

Maomao looked over, feeling a touch of mental indigestion. Short Senior was looking especially engaged.

“It’s in order to equalize not just their basic needs, but their feelings as well,” he said. “It’s said that illness begins with the spirit, but so can treatment. The relief provided by the sense that they’re taking medicine can lead a patient to feel that they’ve been cured.”

“Correct. Strangely enough, the very feeling that one is taking medicine can cause the body to produce the illusion that the medicine is working. These pills are to help account for that.” Luomen picked up one of the fake pills. It was quite a piece of work, designed so that even the color was believable. “In addition to your usual production of medicine, I want you to take shifts to record the condition of the patients here. Is that all right?”

“Yes, sir,” Maomao and the others answered in unison.

At least we finally know what we’ll be doing, she thought. But she still hadn’t had a chance to ask why.

Chapter 4: Drug Trials

At Luomen's direction, Maomao and the others began commuting to the clinic on the edge of town. Still, the four of them weren't enough to keep the place constantly staffed. The clinic already had nurses of its own, and it was much more efficient to make medicine at the medical offices in the palace.

"I'd like to suggest we work in pairs," said Tall Senior, summing up the situation. "At the clinic, we'll make records and look after the patients, while at court we'll continue to make medicine like always." It was nice to have somebody taking charge.

"How are we going to pair off?" asked one of the other physicians.

"I think for starters, the oldest of us should split up."

That makes sense.

The two older doctors knew what they were doing, so they would be able to keep their younger colleagues from getting into any real trouble.

"First, Maomao and me," said Short Senior, so that's who Maomao was paired with. They decided to have the junior and senior colleagues work as pairs, occasionally trading off. "Good to work with you," the doctor said.

"And you," Maomao replied politely. Short Senior didn't talk as much as Tall Senior, but it was clear that he was very capable. He was somewhere in his early thirties, and probably knew a bit more than Tall Senior, who was roughly his same age. He was a careful worker, fastidious in the way he made medicine. His nimble hands suggested he was probably also an excellent surgeon.

So he could have been in surgery...

The fact that he was nonetheless doing apothecary's work suggested that he loved drugs just like Maomao did.

Short Senior's small stature and average looks made her think of a certain abacus-brain (who shall remain nameless), but this man was far more mature.

"All right, shall we go?" Short Senior said.

“Yes, sir.”

Since they would have to bring cargo with them, a carriage would be provided for trips from the court to the clinic. It wasn’t that they couldn’t possibly walk, but they would have to cut through the shopping district on the way, and it was all too likely that they would encounter a pickpocket. Soldiers might travel through unharassed, but a couple of well-dressed civil officials? They’d look like marks all the way.

Maomao and Short Senior arrived at the clinic and replenished the medicine with the supplies they had brought.

“Should we go straight into checking on the patients?” Maomao asked. She’d brought a tie for her sleeves so they wouldn’t get in her way. Now she rolled them up and tied them back so she could move freely.

“No, I think we should start by checking the records,” said Short Senior, grabbing the book where the notes were kept.

Maomao simply had to look on. She suspected they used paper and not wood strips because of the sheer quantity of writing. But she noticed to her dismay that the paper wasn’t of very good quality.

They should get in touch with the quack doctor, have him sell them some at a decent price!

The quack’s family made paper for a living, so Maomao occasionally went to him for a friends-and-family rate on quality material.

The book didn’t record the patients’ names, but it did include their ages and physical sizes as well as their occupations and other details.

“Looks like there used to be a lot more patients than there are now,” Maomao observed. The drug trials appeared to have started about a month prior with around thirty people. Now only a third of them were left. She’d wondered why the clinic seemed so large for the number of patients, and this explained it.

“Sounds like some people were faking,” Short Senior said.

“I can see why.”

Yes, the physicians were developing drugs, but they were offering free treatment, food, and so on. Who could blame a few people for showing up claiming to have the condition the doctors were looking for?

“A few other people left because the medicine couldn’t help them,” Short Senior went on.

“Right.” If the physicians decided the drugs weren’t going to cure you, they would ask you to leave.

“What condition do you think it is?” Short Senior asked.

“Typhlitis, maybe?” Maomao suggested.

“I think so too.”

No specific name of an illness was written down in the book of notes—after all, they’d only assembled patients showing similar tendencies; they couldn’t be certain what disease each had.

“Typhlitis...”

Maomao had dispensed medicine for this condition more than once. On most of those occasions, she’d given out drugs much like the ones being administered to the patients here.

Typhlitis, huh...

Maomao made a thoughtful noise. The condition involved the inflammation of an organ called the cecum. It was possible to relieve the symptoms with medicine, but that was all they were doing—treating symptoms. Some people got better, if their symptoms were mild, but in more severe cases the inflamed area could fester and spread toxins through the body. In such cases, it could spawn other illnesses, and mortality rates went up. She’d heard that more than half of people in that situation died.

It was a decent idea to study the treatment of typhlitis, because it wasn’t particularly uncommon. She wondered, however, why they were using court physicians to conduct such large-scale drug trials.

And there were two other groups too.

Were they also researching the treatment of typhlitis?

Those thoughts led to a natural question.

Who are these experiments being done for?

Maomao knew that it was not a question she could ask, however much she might want to.

“Whatever disease it is, I suppose we should get to work,” said Short Senior.

“Right.” For the moment, getting down to business would be better than pursuing questions she wouldn’t get an answer to.

First, she got an overall view of the situation: She went around checking on the patients.

They were divided into two large rooms, five in each—but this

did not correspond to the groups receiving the real medicine and those getting the placebo.

That would be the wrong way to go about it.

It did mean, however, that she would have to be careful to make sure the right people got the right pills.

As for food, the patients got three meals a day—all congee, good for the digestion. The ingredients were finely chopped, and the porridge was thoroughly cooked. It didn't look like much, but the stock had been made from meat and bones to give it plenty of nutritional value.

If someone had stomach troubles, typhlitis or not, food that was easy to digest was the basic treatment.

Maomao went among the patients, organizing the information in her head. Then she and Short Senior moved to the kitchen so that the patients wouldn't overhear them.

"It does seem to be the case that the patients receiving the real medicine are in better shape," she said.

"Yeah. Inflammation's gone down for some of the ones in the placebo group, but not many."

"Probably the ones with the most physical vitality."

In an experiment like this, the more people you could get, the more precise your results would be. Testing on human subjects meant there would be differences from one individual to another, but increasing the number of subjects would help average out the data.

If Lahan were here, he would be adding them up already.

Which did not mean she was going to call him.

"Master Physician," she started.

"Yeah?" asked Short Senior, who was writing something. She was glad they were alone and she could get away with simply calling him "Master Physician." She could hardly ask his name at this late date.

"If a case of typhlitis doesn't get better with medicine, what exactly is the subsequent treatment?"

Whatever it was, Maomao, unfortunately, hadn't learned it. Her specialty was herbs and medicine, after all.

"You could open their stomach and take out the filth," Short Senior said.

"Would that solve the fundamental problem?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe not." Short Senior didn't sound like it

much concerned him.

"Have you ever done that operation?" Maomao asked.

"Never. I doubt I could." Short Senior scratched the back of his neck with the barrel of the brush uneasily.

"Why not? You look like you would be good at surgery."

Maomao could see how well Short Senior used his hands. Even his handwriting was neat, although she didn't know if that made someone a better surgeon.

"No, I... I couldn't. Can't."

"Can't?"

"It's...blood. I can't stand...blood." He sounded embarrassed.

"Ahhh." Maomao definitely understood that. Everyone had certain things they just didn't cope well with. That was life.

"I'm not actually cut out for doctoring," Short Senior said. He came, however, from a long line of physicians, and had been pushed to take the medical exam whether he wanted to or not. It would have been so easy for him if he'd failed, but other than his aversion to blood, he was really quite talented.

"Honestly? I'm in hell," he confessed. It was hard when you had the skill but not the aptitude for a vocation.

"You have my sympathies" was all Maomao could say.

So it was that they decided to divide the labor between them while they were there at the clinic. Short Senior couldn't stand blood and Maomao couldn't stand buckwheat, so they would cover for each other's weaknesses. They were just giving the patients pills, so there wasn't likely to be blood involved, but then one time someone going to the bathroom had taken a bad step, tripped, and split his forehead open, so Maomao had been the one to treat him. Meanwhile, she left it to Short Senior to make the placebo pills.

Short Senior always looked like he really had it together; somehow, learning about his vulnerability like this made her feel closer to him than she had before.

Chapter 5: A Book Restored

Maomao headed back to the dormitory, her first day of work at the clinic over.

"Hullo, Miss Maomao!"

"Hullo, Miss Chue."

Maomao understood why Chue was there, and when the other woman beckoned, Maomao followed her. As she expected, a carriage was waiting, and she was to get on.

"Who's summoning me today?" she asked. It was presumably either Jinshi or Ah-Duo.

"The Moon Prince today," Chue drawled. "Also, there's someone already in there, so have fun!"

"Someone already in there?"

A pair of eyes goggled out at Maomao from the carriage window.

"Hullo, Niangniang!"

(No reply from Maomao.)

It was Tianyu.

She could think of only one reason Jinshi might call for her and Tianyu.

Is this about Kada's Book?! she thought, nearly breaking into a giant grin. Among Tianyu's ancestors was a physician who, although a member of the Imperial family, had committed an unpardonable crime. Just the other day, they had found the book this ancestor had left behind.

He did say they were repairing it...

Maomao bounced along in the carriage, barely able to contain herself. Before she knew it, she was even humming.

"Is it just me, or does Niangniang seem kind of...creepy today?" Tianyu asked.

"Now, now, you mustn't say such things," Chue drawled. "Didn't the neighborhood uncles ever tell you that?"

"Dr. Liu has definitely gotten mad at me a few times."

They were having a huddled conversation, but it was very much

in character for them that they made sure to have it loud enough that Maomao could hear them.

Say what you want, she thought. Her head was too full of Kada's Book to care about anything else. What might be written in it?

"Okay, from here, we walk," Chue said. The carriage had stopped, but not in front of Jinshi's palace. "We'll be in here today!"

They were somewhere near Jinshi's office. Outside of work hours, Maomao was usually shown to his pavilion, and it had been a long time since she'd come to his office.

"Hey, Niangniang, what are you doing these days?" Tianyu asked, obnoxious as ever. In fact, though, Maomao had exactly the same question.

What's he *doing these days?*

If he'd passed the selection examination, he had presumably received reassignment just like she had.

"What about you?" she shot back. "What are you doing?"

"Take a guess."

Tianyu showed her the palms of his hands. Maomao studied them intently; Chue imitated her.

I see calluses.

Just as those who wielded the sword could develop calluses on their hands, so, too, could those who wielded the brush get them on their fingers. Tianyu's calluses, however, probably came not from a brush but from a scalpel.

The pad of his pointer finger is red.

A red line ran down the side of the finger, showing that he had been holding a scalpel for a very long time.

Doctors used scalpels when cutting skin. Had he been performing autopsies?

No, I don't think so.

Tianyu's eyes had gone beyond shining to outright sparkling, like those of a cat who had finally spotted a flesh-and-blood rat instead of a toy fluff ball.

"Are you operating on living people?" she asked.

"Wooooh!"

His reaction suggested she was correct.

Maomao wasn't sure they should be discussing surgery right in front of Chue, but it was probably useless to try to hide anything from her, and besides, she had to suspect that doctors did that kind of thing. Maomao decided to just go ahead and entertain the

subject.

She thought she could see how this worked: Patients whose condition was not helped by the drug trials were moved on to surgery.

"Are you cutting them open and removing the filth?" she asked.

"Have you learned to read minds since I saw you last, Niangniang?" Tianyu asked, a theatrical expression of befuddlement on his face. It was not as cute as he thought it was. Chue was doing the same, but at least with her it was *sort* of cute.

The conversation had taken them almost to the doorstep of Jinshi's office.

Wow, this really takes me back.

Maomao saw hallway windows that she had polished the hell out of when she was Jinshi's serving maid. And she'd had more than a few tussles with other palace ladies there.

There were no officials in the halls now; it was almost dark.

Now that I think about it, this is the same office he had back when he was a "eunuch."

She was only now realizing. She might have expected him to find a new place once it was public knowledge that he was the Emperor's younger brother, but not so. The current location was just too convenient.

Two guards stood outside the office. Chue greeted them, and they stepped away from the door in an unspoken command to enter.

"Hellooo! Pardon me?" Tianyu called as he entered the office. The gravity of the moment didn't seem to have any impact on his attitude.

Maomao, meanwhile, tried to steady her breathing as she entered the room. *I have to calm down. I don't know for* sure *that this is about Kada's Book.*

As soon as she saw who was inside, however, any thought of remaining calm fled her mind. This was more than enough reason to get agitated, although it had nothing to do with Kada's Book.

"It's been much too long," said the other person in the room. He was a young man, not yet twenty years old, who bowed his head in a show of humility. His deferential attitude might be enough to fool some people, but his name was violent and beastly: Hulan, which meant "tiger and wolf."

Maomao had half a mind to send a flying kick straight into him,

and her body was already nearly moving, but Chue took her firmly by the hand. “Dignity, Miss Maomao, dignity,” she advised. “I know how you feel, I really do, but we must comport ourselves properly.”

Chue was very strong; even with one hand she could keep Maomao firmly in place.

“Just an arm. Just one arm,” Maomao begged. If she could just break *one* of his limbs...

“That’s not dignified,” Chue repeated. “Let’s at least wait for a moonless night.”

Hulan was the reason Maomao had been chased all over I-sei Province and ultimately nearly killed by bandits. And Chue had as much reason to hold a grudge against him as Maomao did: It was because of him that she had lost the use of her arm.

“I must say, you’re both looking very frightening tonight,” Hulan said. The complete lack of venom in his smile made him all the more grating. Maomao’s hackles went up and she gave him a threatening look.

“Ha ha ha! You’re even less popular than I am!” Tianyu chortled. Evidently he actually was bothered by the general distaste people had for him.

Maomao had had to see Hulan on the hunt the other day, and she was aggravated to now find him here in Jinshi’s office.

“So you’ve arrived,” said Jinshi, who was seated in a chair waiting for them. Basen stood beside him as his bodyguard. A curtain, otherwise out of place, hung across a corner of the room, meaning Baryou must be with them as well.

“Good evening, Moon Prince. Incidentally, I believe there’s someone present who has no business being here. Do you not see fit to chase them out immediately?” Maomao asked with her most humble attitude.

“You don’t mean me, do you?” Tianyu said, pointing at himself. Sadly, no; today, she did not mean him. There was someone even worse than Tianyu there.

“Why, whomever do you mean?” Hulan asked, looking innocent.

“Now, now, you must be able to see things objectively. Shall I bring you a mirror?” Chue said, backing Maomao up.

“Miss Chue, Miss Chue, I have a mirror,” Maomao said, taking a small bronze plate from the folds of her robes.

“I should have known you would be prepared, Miss Maomao.”

Jinshi watched this exchange with exasperation. “I fully understand what you’re trying to say, believe me, I do, but as I’ve told you before, this man is capable. So just live with it. Also, I’d rather he be where I can keep an eye on him.”

“Wait…is it *moi* you’ve been talking about all this time?” Hulan put on his surprised face. His features were young and cute; they were the only cute thing about him.

Jinshi got a bit of a faraway look in his eyes. Hulan was, after all, publicly the younger brother of the ruler of the western capital, so Jinshi couldn’t afford to ditch him outright.

“I’m sorry, but I have no time to chat with people who might as well be animals. Could we get straight to the point?” Maomao asked, collecting herself. “And incidentally, what is the point? I know it’s got to be the…you know. *You* know.”

“It looks like you don’t need any help from me to imagine why I might have called you here,” Jinshi said. “But in any case, calm down and have a seat.” He made a motion as if gesturing to a dog to sit.

Maomao seated herself on the couch, although she fidgeted furiously. Tianyu sat down too, and Chue planted herself between them.

“Why are you sitting, Miss Chue?” Maomao asked.

“Miss Chue is putting herself on the line—it’s very valiant of her,” Chue said and winked broadly at Jinshi. He didn’t say anything, but he nodded at her.

There were no palace ladies present, so Hulan made tea. Maomao folded her legs to one side and made it her business to look annoyed. She glowered at the tea he gave her and gave it a good sniff, making sure there was no poison in it.

“You’re not being very polite, Niangniang,” Tianyu said, adding dramatically, “That’s not very nice.”

“I’m simply behaving as *befits* the person I’m interacting with,” she replied. Tianyu was hardly comporting himself with the formality one might have expected before Jinshi. He seemed to have the same attitude as Maomao: that if Hulan could be permitted so much, then so could they.

“I’m sorry to tell you there’s no poison in the tea today,” Hulan said apologetically.

“Yes, what a shame. It would make Miss Maomao so happy, and give the Moon Prince such a fine excuse to execute you,” Chue said.

“My dear older sister Chue. You’re so cruel to me.”

Sparks flew between Chue and Hulan even more than between Hulan and Maomao. It evidently wasn’t the first time this had happened; Basen’s expression clearly said, *Again?*

The discussion was never going to get anywhere at this rate. Maomao looked at Jinshi. He looked back with unusual seriousness. “Before we go any further, there’s something I want to say to you, Maomao.”

“What is it, sir?”

“First, calm down.”

“I am calm, sir.”

“Don’t fuss.”

“I’m not fussing, sir.”

“Steady yourself.”

“I’m steady, sir.”

“You’re ready now?”

“Yes, sir.”

After all that, Maomao was fairly sure she was actually calm—until the moment Jinshi took out a paulownia-wood box and opened the lid, revealing battered old pages sitting on top of some white paper.

“This is from the restored Kada’s Book,” he said.

“Ka...da...?” Maomao went still for an instant, and then she exploded: “Whhhooooooaaaaaa!”

Yes, she’d known. She’d understood what they were there for. And yet on hearing the name, she couldn’t restrain her excitement.

“She’s not very calm,” Tianyu said.

“Dignity, Miss Maomao!” Chue added. They both turned to stare at her.

Maomao immediately reached for the battered book, but Jinshi slapped her hand away.

“Wh-Whyyy?!”

“Look at it—this is *after* we restored it! If you just grab it in a fit of rapture, you’ll destroy it, and then no one will be able to read it!”

“Of course, sir, I know that. I’ll be gentle with it. So please, please, please, pretty please let me see it!”

Maomao straightened up and looked at Jinshi with her most serious expression. With no small amount of trepidation, he handed her the book.

“It looks like it was originally bound like a sutra,” she observed.

“Indeed. We cut it apart so it would be easier to repair.”

Sutra construction was also called a folded book. As the name implied, it was made by folding the paper over.

Maomao studied the restored book intently. Tianyu trotted over, but she shoved him aside; he was just getting in the way.

Does it have anything about smallpox?

The book was a hundred years old, so the characters were considerably different from the way they were written today. They were also faded in places, making the text supremely difficult to read. Notwithstanding those hurdles, however, she definitely wanted to read this book.

“There. It talks about the smallpox outbreak a hundred years ago,” she said. It was what she happened to be interested in at the moment, so she seized on it immediately. Tianyu, meanwhile, wasn’t particularly moved; smallpox wasn’t dissection, after all.

What mattered in medicine was quantity of case studies and records of attempted treatments. Anything showing repeated attempts—and often repeated failures—to treat a disease would help bring future medicine closer to the right path. That’s what made these old pages so important.

And details there were: how the disease had spread, how it had been treated.

Let’s see, they dealt with it by...

But the page happened to be cut off right where Maomao might have found the answer to her question. They must not have restored that part of it yet.

“Are these all the pages you have?” she asked.

“The rest are still being repaired. Would you like to see for yourself?” Jinshi stood up and crooked a finger at them to follow him. They left the office, but they didn’t go far—only about two rooms down the hall.

“What’s this?” Maomao asked. The room was filled with a distinctive, pleasant humidity and suffused with the scent of paper.

There was hardly anyone there—one person at the door and another within, working. Considering that it was after hours, these people must have received special permission to be here. They were dipping the paper into what appeared to be water and endeavoring to peel apart stuck pages.

The fire that provided illumination wavered. It was surrounded by metal to make sure the flames couldn’t catch any of the paper—a

wise choice under the circumstances.

That does not look like easy work, Maomao thought—but the men had been told to work fast, so work fast they would.

"We're having it specially restored, but given what's in this book, we can't exactly have a crowd of people working on it. As you can see, it's rather...small-scale in here," Jinshi said. Neither the contents of the book nor its author could be made public. "The in-progress work is here."

Maomao's eyes shimmered, but no matter how she squinted, she couldn't read the pages. The paper was yellowed and the characters had begun to run; by the flickering firelight, they almost looked hazy. As poor a shape as the pages Jinshi had shown them earlier had been in, it was painfully clear how much work had been done to make them more readable.

"The pictures are pretty easy to see," Tianyu said, and Maomao looked at the other pages currently under repair.

The pages had been lined up one beside the other. They were weathered, with stains and smudged characters, but there were also pictures depicting what appeared to be a human body.

"Oooh!" Maomao said, her eyes making perfect circles.

There were detailed illustrations of medicinal herbs. The most prominent one, however, was of a dissection. It showed the insides of a person in great detail. It was smudged in places, but easier to make out than the writing.

Tianyu said this was one of his ancestors, right?

It was a living demonstration of just how thick blood could be. Tianyu was poring over the illustration, making sounds of amazement. Maomao, too, stared fixedly at it.

She didn't say anything.

He didn't say anything.

Chue didn't say anything.

"Somebody say something!" Jinshi demanded, looking straight at Maomao.

"Sorry, sir," she replied, her eyes still glued to the pages.

What was more, as far as she could tell from the picture, unlike the earlier pages, this one dealt with diseases of the internal organs, and it mentioned typhlitis. Maybe that explained why Tianyu was as silent as Maomao.

At length she told Jinshi, "This is a *very* interesting book."

"I can't say I find it very engaging," Jinshi said, squinting at the

picture of the autopsy.

"They may have ignored common morals to do it, but they didn't do it by half measures—that's what makes the outcome so intriguing."

"And you can sleep at night, thinking like that?" Jinshi shot back.

As Maomao looked at the image of a human being lying there in pieces, she contemplated how different the value of a human life had been a hundred years before. It appeared that if the surgery had been successful, the authors wrote down its subsequent progress, while if it failed, they autopsied the body and made illustrations of it.

They didn't waste anything.

"Do you think their patients were slaves?" she asked.

"It's a likely possibility."

Cutting open someone's belly was almost unthinkable. Even a dead person had to be treated with respect. That, at least, was the common consensus.

In practice, the only people doctors cut up to learn more about how humans were built were criminals. In the same way, if they were going to do experimental surgery, outside of extraordinary circumstances it was unlikely that they would use ordinary people. Maomao didn't know what had passed for "common sense" at the time, but it seemed plausible that the physicians would have been using criminals or possibly slaves in their research.

The only reason it had been permitted to cut open the Empress Dowager's belly to give birth to the current Emperor was because in the worst-case scenario, she was going to die anyway. When Maomao had helped perform a similar procedure for Xiaohong in the western capital, it was because the girl had been on death's doorstep. Maomao understood very well why Xiaohong's mother had objected so strenuously.

But what about now?

"Are you cutting them open and removing the filth?"

"Have you learned to read minds since I saw you last, Niangniang?"

The exchange implied that Tianyu was already operating on living people.

In the late stages of typhlitis...

The mortality rate was high. By taking out the filth that had collected in the body, they might be able to improve symptoms at

least slightly. Hence there would be no real sense that surgery was the wrong move, but she was taken aback that they would use a newly minted physician like Tianyu to do the job. From the color of his fingertips, she got the impression that it wasn't just once or twice that he had done this procedure.

I admit, there's no question about his ability, but still.

She felt like this was more surgeries than would normally be allotted simply to polish a young doctor's skills. He probably wasn't limited to patients who had come from Maomao's clinic.

It's like they're trying to get him as much experience as possible, as fast as they can.

The suspicion had been growing in her mind since seeing the drug trials, and now it came close to certainty.

There in the book repair room, she was with Jinshi, Chue, and Tianyu. Basen stood guard not far away. Maomao thought Chue was being awfully quiet; she looked over and discovered she had a long piece of candy.

"Can we eat in here?" Maomao asked.

"My huthban gabe it to me," Chue replied. So Baryou had been in the office. He knew to give her some candy to keep her quiet—he really was her husband.

Can I bring up this subject here? Maomao wondered. She looked around at those present and pondered how far she should speak. She would have preferred not to talk about it in front of Tianyu.

She said nothing, and time passed.

Chapter 6: The Patient

They stayed in the book repair room for a while. Tianyu was humming loudly, which got on Maomao's nerves, but since she was probably doing the same thing, maybe she should take a long hard look at herself first.

Jinshi had disappeared at some point; maybe he still had work to do. That was frustrating to Maomao: She was left with the nuisance that was Tianyu, but without the crucial key that was Jinshi.

"All righty, everyone, what say we wrap it up?" Chue drawled. "Miss Chue hasn't had her dinner yet!" Evidently she was done eating her candy, although she was still licking her lips. "The Moon Prince said he'll call you again when there are more pages to see," she assured them.

"Man, I'm hungry too," Tianyu said as he and Maomao left the room.

"I'll get a carriage ready," said Chue.

"It's all good. I've been sleeping in the medical office lately anyway."

"At least get a fresh set of clothes," Maomao urged him. If a physician didn't maintain hygiene, what was the point?

"I know, I know," Tianyu said. They watched him go, then Maomao headed back toward Jinshi's office.

"What's up?" Chue chirped.

"There's something I'd like to check."

"Yeppers, sounds good!" Chue went dutifully ahead of Maomao and said a few words to the guard outside the office door. Then she turned back. "Okie dokie, right this way!"

Maomao walked into Jinshi's office for the second time that evening.

"What's the matter?" asked Jinshi. He was, as she had suspected, still working. Basen and Hulan were already gone, although she didn't know whether Baryou was still behind his curtain. There was a soldier to serve as guard, but it wasn't Basen—

Maomao didn't know his name, but he was clearly someone Jinshi trusted.

Chue stood behind her.

"Nothing," Maomao said, taking a close look at Jinshi's expression. There was something that had been bugging her ever since she found out about the drug trials. "Master Jinshi. May I ask a question?"

"What is it?"

Jinshi noticed that Maomao was concerned about the people around them; he swept the room with a quick glance himself to see if there was anyone he needed to get out of there.

"Would you happen to be sick these days, Master Jinshi?"

"Do I look it?"

Maomao looked at him intently. "Your shortage of sleep is less acute than it used to be, but you continue to overwork yourself. You're borrowing against your future health. Also, you still like to hurt yourself."

"Was that last part really necessary?"

"It's true, sir."

She was sure the red flower brand must still be on his flank. It was her way of indicating that she was about to talk about something very secret—and Jinshi was clever enough to understand.

He raised a hand, and his guard withdrew, although he didn't look very sure about it. Maomao suspected this meant that Baryou had already gone home as well.

"What about me?" Chue piped up.

"You too."

"Goodness gracious! Well, enjoy yourselves!" She shuffled out of the room, looking dejected. The thought of the report she seemed likely to bring Suiren was frightening.

"All right, go ahead. And don't beat around the bush."

"Is someone in the Imperial family sick with some disease of the internal organs?"

"What makes you ask that?"

"The physicians, chiefly the palace's own doctors, are actually conducting drug trials. They're also getting the new physicians lots of surgical experience. Considering the scale of the endeavor, I have to think there's some serious illness afoot."

Jinshi set down the brush he had been holding. "Who else has

noticed?"

"Didn't you deliberately gather people who would keep their mouths shut even if they did?" Maomao thought back on the people who had been assembled for the selection exam. They were all folks who were exceptional even among the ranks of the physicians.

Well... Maybe not all of them.

Dr. Liu was probably keeping a very close eye on Tianyu.

Jinshi was quiet, considering his words. At that moment, there was a knock at the door.

"I thought I told everyone to clear out," Jinshi said, somewhat mystified.

"I'll go see who it is," said Maomao. When she opened the door, she found the familiar, overworked face of Gaoshun, Chue peeking out from behind him.

"Miss Chue's animal instincts told her that you just might want her father-in-law around," she said, standing up ramrod straight in a most unusual pose. Even if she'd hurried to get Gaoshun, she'd brought him awfully quickly.

"I'm very sorry," Gaoshun said. "She said Xiaomao was here with you, Moon Prince."

"It's all right. You've come at just the right moment—I have a question. Chue, you may withdraw."

"What?"

Evidently she'd had every intention of sticking around, but Jinshi wasn't going to let her. Gaoshun handed his daughter-in-law several snacks and sent her out the door.

Gaoshun and Baryou both handle Chue the same way.

An odd place to find similarity between father and son.

"Now, Gaoshun. Why did you come here?"

"I suspected that a clever person might deduce from the physicians' recent activities that something was going on. And I thought this might be about the time Xiaomao would ask you about it."

Maomao shivered to realize how thoroughly he had seen through her.

"Thinking that I might be more knowledgeable in the matter about which our little cat wishes to learn, I took the liberty of coming here myself."

Specifically to explain things to me? Maomao tilted her head quizzically: That was awfully proactive for Gaoshun.

“At the Emperor’s orders?” Jinshi asked.

“No, sir. My own personal judgment.”

Jinshi grunted. “Very well.”

“In that case, let me begin with a question for Xiaomao. What were you about to ask the Moon Prince?”

“I was just asking Master Jinshi whether someone in the Imperial family is ill.”

Gaoshun referred to Jinshi as the Moon Prince: He had long ago ceased to be Jinshi’s direct servant and now served the Emperor personally.

“Might it be the Emperor who’s sick?” Maomao asked.

“Yes,” Gaoshun replied without hesitation.

I sort of suspected, but...

To actually hear it acknowledged weighed heavily on her.

“What is His Majesty’s current condition?”

“What do you suspect, Xiaomao?” Gaoshun asked, answering her question with a question.

“This is just my speculation...” she began.

“Your favorite expression,” Jinshi remarked. Maomao didn’t assume her opinion was an actual answer, however, so what else was she supposed to say? This was just her guess based on what she knew of the illness among the patients in the drug trial.

“My guess is that His Majesty has typhlitis. My reasoning is that at present, the court physicians are validating the effects of various drugs for the condition. And if it is typhlitis, I suspect it’s chronic.”

“What makes you say that?” asked not Gaoshun this time, but Jinshi.

“It takes time to verify the effects of a drug. If the condition were acute, it would be too late to be doing drug trials now. Or, the typhlitis appeared earlier in life and was cured, but there’s a risk of relapse—then it would be worth investigating.”

Gaoshun nodded. “It’s the latter. His Majesty had typhlitis once, but it was cured with drugs at the time.”

“So you’re saying that the same symptoms have been observed again?”

“Yes. I should know—I was his aide at the time.”

There was a weight to Gaoshun’s words.

If he was serving the Emperor, this must have been before Jinshi was appointed to oversee the rear palace.

Which was to say, before the throne had changed hands.

“When specifically did this happen?” Maomao asked.

“More than ten years ago. Even before that, His Majesty had chronic stomachaches, and at the time he also had nausea and occasional fevers. His attending physician diagnosed typhlitis due to stress and was able to calm the condition using boiled herbs and a change of diet.”

Typhlitis could be caused by a wide variety of factors, so it was hard to be certain that stress had been the reason. But if that was what the physician at the time had diagnosed, His Majesty must have been under enough stress that it had been impossible to miss.

“Do we know the source of the stress?” Maomao asked.

“It’s hard to be completely certain, but in his capacity as crown prince, His Majesty often argued with the mother of the former emperor—much more than with his father. I suspect that might have been the cause.”

Maomao was quiet. *In other words, he was arguing with the empress regnant.* That would give anyone enough stress to cause an ulcer or two.

Maomao had never actually met the former empress dowager, popularly known as the “empress regnant,” so she couldn’t say for certain, but from what she’d heard, the woman had been a force of nature. Word on the street likewise held that in her twilight years, she had often clashed with the man who was the crown prince at the time and was now the Emperor.

“Also—and I don’t know how you’ll feel to hear this, Xiaomao...”

“Yes, sir?”

“The one who was always at His Majesty’s side at that time was Sir Lakan.”

Maomao’s mouth hung open. “Not good news!”

“Your true feelings are showing,” Jinshi remarked before he could stop himself.

Nonetheless, now that Gaoshun had mentioned it, it made a lot of sense. Seventeen—no, eighteen—years ago, the monocled freak head returned from the western capital. He would have needed a powerful backer to rise in the world as he had after that. Given that the crown prince was both younger than him and had been at odds with the empress regnant, an alliance could have strengthened both their positions.

It might at least explain why a man who took matters into his

own hands to the extent of smashing through the walls of the rear palace got away without so much as a slap on the wrist.

He's got a finger on the Emperor's weakness.

Yes, it made sense...almost too much sense.

"You don't think the old fart with the monocle might have been the source of the stress?" said Maomao.

"I prefer to refrain from commenting on the matter," Gaoshun said. So he was running away.

"All right. So the Emperor is now showing the same symptoms he did back then?"

"That's right. As far as Dr. Liu and Dr. Kan can discern, the situation isn't yet critical."

Dr. Kan: in other words, Maomao's old man, Luomen.

"But it also doesn't look like it's going to fix itself, huh?" said Maomao. "If anything, it must be gradually getting worse."

Gaoshun nodded.

If the condition didn't seem to be responding to drugs, they would have to do surgery.

Wounding the "jade body"? Yikes.

Even Maomao understood that those who would take such an action must be prepared to die for it, even if they did it in the name of surgery. Even if the procedure was successful, who knew what people might say? Someone might find some excuse to put them to death anyway. They were dealing with someone who lived "above the clouds," which automatically made this a vastly weightier matter than even the cutting open of the Empress Dowager's stomach.

Maomao unconsciously scratched her head. It would be ridiculous for her father Luomen, not to mention Dr. Liu—both excellent doctors—to suffer unjust punishment over something completely beyond their control.

"Why has the condition relapsed? What could cause—" Maomao began, but then she happened to look at Jinshi. Specifically, his flank.

It's this son of a—!

Jinshi bit his lip and pressed a hand to his side. At least he seemed to know.

Maomao tried to put herself in the Emperor's shoes. Officially, Jinshi was his younger brother, but in reality he was his son. And that young man had abruptly burned a brand into his side and

asserted that he would not take a consort, and *then* he'd disappeared to the western capital and not returned for a solid year —yeah, that would cause some pretty unimaginable stress.

There were probably plenty of other things weighing on the royal mind as well, but Maomao had a suspicion that Jinshi accounted for a pretty good percentage of it.

However, from Jinshi's perspective, the Emperor was his older brother, not his father. He still didn't know the secret of his own parentage, she was pretty sure. That misapprehension was a big part of what had allowed him to do something as rash as burning a brand into himself.

All right, no point pursuing the cause of the illness at this moment, then.

"Master Gaoshun," Maomao said. "What purpose does it serve to hear the opinion of the likes of me?"

"One wishes to get a variety of perspectives, Xiaomao."

"A variety, sir?"

Gaoshun of all people should be able to hear about His Majesty's condition from the highest-ranking physicians in the land. By the same token, however, hearing from any of the lower physicians would be difficult. She supposed he wanted the viewpoint of a minion like her to avoid becoming too biased in his thinking.

Then again, perhaps he was considering the possibility that the upper physicians were lying to them. Whether from good motives or bad, it was hardly unusual for a doctor to conceal the extent of a patient's illness.

"If you're involved, Gaoshun, then I take it we can assume it's not good," Jinshi said.

"No, sir, it's not. I think it will soon be hard to cover for His Majesty's condition. We've been careful to conceal his poor pallor with whitening powder, but I think people will soon begin to notice anyway."

"And once they do, it's going to be a big deal," Maomao said.

Ordinarily, one wished to worry only about the sick person themselves. With the royal family, however, matters were different. The state of their health could provoke a great deal of talk.

"If anything should happen to His Majesty, the country would be thrown into chaos," Jinshi muttered, and he was right. The Crown Prince wasn't even five years old. If he were to have a regent

to rule in his stead, it would be Empress Gyokuyou's father, Gyokuen.

Many of the Emperor's subjects disliked the Crown Prince, in whose veins flowed distant western blood. Many others no doubt would wish to put Consort Lihua's son, who was the same age as the Crown Prince, on the throne.

And there was one other candidate: the twenty-two-year-old younger son of the Emperor's own mother. Jinshi.

Chaos! Chaos wouldn't even begin to cover it.

Jinshi himself might not have any interest in the jade throne, but that wouldn't dissuade anyone else. Crying that he simply couldn't because he had a brand in his flank wouldn't pass muster.

Just when it seemed the discord between the Empress's faction and the Empress Dowager's was calming down, an even bigger bomb was poised to go off.

This isn't going to make him less *stressed out,* Maomao thought. Trying to conceal his illness so as not to worry those around him would only make it worse. *The Emperor has to be the Emperor before he can be a sick man.*

Whatever the illness, so long as one was in the position of majesty, one had to simply get through it. One could not just beg off and relax for a while to recover.

The Emperor was said to live above the clouds; he was not like those who lived on the earth.

Gaoshun might be worried about the state of his milk brother, the Emperor, but he was also a vassal of the same man. What was it that he, a vassal, wanted Maomao to do?

"Master Gaoshun. Are you sure you should be quite so forthcoming with me?"

"Are you the kind to blab to others, Xiaomao?" he replied promptly—the back-and-forth felt familiar.

"Surely you don't need to go so far as to tell me the Emperor's actual condition."

"It would be rude to ask for information without offering any."

It sounded as if Gaoshun were talking about simple give-and-take, but that wasn't really true.

"I have faith that the physicians will tell you only what is true," Maomao said. It was all she *could* say.

"Understood," Gaoshun replied, and left.

It had been so long since the three of them had had a chance to

talk together, but this conversation had only reinforced to her how different their positions now were. Nonetheless, Maomao decided to take a positive view of things: This was certainly better than if the Emperor had no allies at all.

Be that as it may...

Maomao watched Gaoshun leave, then glanced at Jinshi. “What are you going to do, sir?” she asked.

“I can’t say I know what you mean.”

Maomao crept up to Jinshi and poked him in the flank.

“Yikes!”

“You should think about what you’ve done.”

Jinshi pressed a hand to his abdomen and said, “Believe me…I’m aware.”

Chapter 7: A Man's Romance

Maomao now knew the terrible secret of the Emperor's illness, but the next day, work went on as usual. Today she was with not Short Senior, but Tall Senior.

"Good to be working with you," she said politely.

"Yeah, good to have you," he said. He spoke less formally than Short Senior, but he was tall enough that he was still somewhat intimidating. He and Maomao looked sort of unbalanced when they stood next to each other, but Tall Senior was thinner and less built than Lihaku.

Today, they would spend the day at court, making medicine.

"Keep on your toes," Tall Senior advised her. "They changed the recipe yesterday."

"All right, sure."

They chatted as they ground rice powder in their mortars. Maomao and the others were assigned to this duty to make sure that nothing adulterated the powder while it was being made. She suspected that some of the medicine they were producing would be given to the Emperor himself.

The powder that emerged from the mortars was very fine—so fine that they had to put cloths over their mouths to make sure they didn't inhale it.

"You could almost use this stuff as whitening powder," Maomao observed.

"Ground rice? As whitening powder?" Tall Senior responded.

"Sure. It's a lot safer than powder with lead in it."

"Lead? Actually, didn't they ban that in the rear palace a few years ago?"

"Yes, I believe they did," Maomao said. She would never forget the case.

"Speaking of which, is it true you served in the rear palace yourself, Maomao?"

He knows my name?

Maomao started to feel bad that she hadn't bothered to learn

his but had simply assigned him a nickname at her own discretion.

"It's true. I wasn't even there for two years, though."

Tall Senior's interest was clearly piqued, although he didn't stop working as he said, "Hey, can I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead."

"Is it true that the rear palace is just bursting with beautiful women?"

It was such a forthright question that she actually rarely heard it, giving it a sort of novelty.

"I suppose," she said. "The consorts are certainly all lovely, and generally the serving women as well."

The rear palace had certain standards for those admitted to it. Of course, there were always those like Maomao who fell short of the mark, but by and large the women there were above average in looks.

"Huh! Wow."

"Don't get your hopes up," Maomao said firmly. "It isn't just a place where women chortle and play."

Sometimes women found themselves poisoned, and gossip flew everywhere, and sometimes there were hair-pulling catfights. Sometimes there were also affairs between ladies or with the eunuchs—but Maomao saw fit to leave that unspoken.

"You certainly don't pull your punches," Tall Senior said.

"In the rear palace, everyone is vying for His Majesty's Imperial affection, so they can hardly just all hold hands and be friends."

It was, admittedly, a decent enough environment that good sense could still be found among the most important ladies, such as Empress Gyokuyou or Consort Lihua. Nonetheless, it wasn't as if there were no battles there.

Sounds like it was a lot worse under the former emperor, though. Just the thought was enough to give Maomao goosebumps. In fact, grudges and resentments caused by His Former Majesty had created more than one problem in the rear palace in her own time.

"All right, but still," Tall Senior said, unwilling to relinquish his dreams. Maomao found that even her most studious-looking colleagues would reveal a more frivolous side if she talked to them long enough.

One might have expected that chatting on the job like this would get them scolded by their superiors, but that wasn't the case. Doctors had to know how to get information from a person while

talking to them, so it was good practice—as long as their hands kept moving and they didn't make any mistakes, it was fine if they talked together.

"Speaking of, the other day I got my first glimpse of the Empress. She's really lovely!" Tall Senior said.

"Isn't she, though?" Maomao replied with just a hint of pride. She still thought of the inhabitants of the Jade Pavilion as her people.

I wonder if Empress Gyokuyou knows about the Emperor's illness.

If she did, would she worry about him and hope for him to recover? More likely, she would consider what the world would look like if and when His Majesty passed on.

It was hard to call the Empress His Majesty's wife in the strict sense—but she was certainly the mother of the Crown Prince.

"That other girl with her, her family member—she was beautiful too. I never knew that foreign blood could give a person hair like that."

A girl in her family?

For a second, Maomao thought maybe he meant Princess Lingli, but she realized it was probably the adopted daughter Gyoku-ou had sent to the capital.

"It's not just about being foreign, though. Red hair in general just isn't very common," Maomao said. Empress Gyokuyou was really the only person with proper red hair that she had ever seen. She'd seen a few people around I-sei Province with roughly similar hair color, but it had still been unusual. There was less red hair out there than gold or silver hair, so it must have been rare indeed.

"Oh yeah—did you know that you can become a redhead after birth?" Tall Senior asked.

Maomao pricked up her ears. "Is that like how you can go white-haired from psychological shock?"

She'd heard stories of people's hair turning white overnight on account of terrifying experiences. It didn't really happen that fast, but it was certainly true that psychological factors could cause a person to have more white hair.

"No, I heard it's from malnutrition."

"Malnutrition, sir?" Would that suggest, then, that the cause was a lack of nutrients when the hair was being formed? "Would the missing nutrient be meat, by chance?" She knew meat and fish were important sources of nutrition for hair and nails.

“Yes, I think so. The hair can lose its coloration and turn gold or red, or so they say.”

So they say: In other words, he hadn’t actually seen it for himself. Still, the idea was intriguing, Maomao thought. She’d heard a lot of stories from her father Luomen, and read a lot of books as well, but there were still so many things she had never heard.

“That’s a very interesting fact,” she said, collecting the powder from her mortar. “Know any others?” Her eyes began to sparkle.

“You sure are demanding of your seniors, huh? I don’t know if I’ve got any other interesting tidbits...” Tall Senior worked his mortar and pestle, making a thoughtful noise. He was a good senior who wanted to indulge a request from his junior. “Well, speaking of meat and fish...”

“Yes? Did you think of something?” Maomao’s eyes shone brighter.

“I did. But since we’ve got the time, how about we do this by question and answer?”

“Question and answer, sir?” Maomao nodded; she wasn’t concerned about whether she “won” or “lost” the discussion, so she was more than happy even if it turned out she didn’t know the answers.

“All right, here we go. Long ago, our land fought against another nation but lost terribly. The soldier in charge of the army was a man of very sharp wits who always grasped the strategic situation and made wise judgments. He sent scouts to reconnoiter the enemy encampment, and determined there was a good chance of victory, on which basis he gave battle. If he was so sure he would win, why did he lose?”

“Military matters aren’t really my area of expertise,” Maomao said, frowning at what turned out to be quite a different topic from what she had expected. “Help me out.”

“Oh, at least *try* to think it through.”

“I told you, it’s not my field.”

The two of them chatted away, their mortars grinding and the powder collecting.

“Okay, okay. Your hint is: meat.”

“Meat?” Maomao cocked her head and *hmm*ed thoughtfully.

Meat, meat, meat... Maybe he means they were caught in some unique trap or something?

It seemed unlikely that actual meat was the issue at hand.

The state of the army's nutrition? No...

Maomao dusted the powder off her hands. As she'd said, the ground rice could have served as whitening powder, and it left her hands very white. They were using polished rice so as to be sure no bran got into the mixture.

"Bran..."

Bran was very fibrous; it helped regulate digestion. (It was Maomao's bad habit to immediately consider the medicinal applications of whatever she happened to be thinking about.)

Digestion...

She gave a great clap of her hands.

"Figure it out?" Tall Senior asked.

"Yes. Could it be that this quick-witted commander had mistaken the size of the enemy forces? I think perhaps his scouts misunderstood how to judge their scale."

"What makes you say that?"

"I think his foes were people who eat a lot of meat. I've heard that one way of determining the size of an enemy unit is to examine their waste. But people who eat a lot of grains produce more excrement than people who eat mostly meat."

When someone took in a lot of fibrous food, the amount of their stool increased—sometimes by two or three times. And brown rice had more fiber than white rice. If the scouts had judged the quantity of waste based on their experiences from their own camp and had used that to estimate the number of enemy troops, they could have come up with completely the wrong number.

Tall Senior formed a big circle with his hands, meaning *right answer.* Maomao allowed herself a flush of self-satisfaction.

"Any other stories?" she asked.

"Couldn't you ask about something else?" Tall Senior said, sounding like he was tired of the subject.

Let's see... What else is there to ask?

Suddenly, Maomao thought of the physician she'd encountered at the selection exam—the one who'd been interested in Suirei.

"Have you been managing the medicine for very long, sir?"

"Hmm... About five years now, I'd say."

"Then, do you know the person who used to be in charge of the management? Until about three years ago, I think?" Maomao had a sense it had been roughly that long since Suirei had faked her own suicide and disappeared.

“Oh, do you mean Tairan? I thought I saw him talking to you after the test.”

“So you did. Why didn’t you rescue me?” Maomao pursed her lips at him.

“I didn’t realize you two knew each other.”

“We don’t, exactly. He’s more an acquaintance of an acquaintance. He was familiar with a palace lady who killed herself some time ago.”

“Ahhh. Yes, I remember. Suirei, right?” Surprisingly, Tall Senior seemed to be okay with the whole thing. “He said he was going to propose to her or something.”

“You mean, as in marriage?”

Maomao was suddenly filled with a sense of pity for Tairan. Suirei had probably planned to use him for her own ends all along. There was some room for sympathy with Suirei too—she couldn’t go against the Shi clan—but it didn’t change the fact that Tairan was essentially collateral damage.

“I guess she only got close to him so she could take advantage of him,” Tall Senior said. “She was a bit on the tall side, but she certainly had a pretty face. That was a rough time, I tell you. The whole department had to rework the way we were managing the medicines, they made us get rid of the herb garden we’d been quietly keeping on the side, and of course Tairan was demoted...”

“Herb garden?” Maomao said, biting her lip. She’d actually cherished a slim hope that she might be entrusted with that garden when she became an assistant to the physicians, but now that hope was dashed entirely.

“It was his fault for bringing his personal feelings into his work. Although he was a skilled physician, especially when it came to anesthetics,” Tall Senior said.

“Anesthetics?” Maomao asked, her ears pricking up again.

“Yeah. Doctors around here don’t use them much; they just tell all those injured soldiers to grin and bear it. But there are some you don’t want to use because they’re actually quite toxic, or can create dependency.”

“I know,” Maomao said. That was exactly why she had struggled so much when it came to doing surgery on Xiaohong in the western capital. She’d even been prepared to do the procedure with the girl held down by force if she thrashed from the pain.

“Tairan understood those factors, and had a gift for mixing

formulations that would put the least strain on the patient."

"If Dr. Tairan was that good and that knowledgeable about poisons, I wish you would have mentioned it sooner." Maomao was practically snorting with excitement and gradually cornering Tall Senior. Now she wanted to learn everything she could from Tairan. Perhaps Suirei had approached him in part because of the knowledge he possessed.

"Why get mad at me about it?" Tall Senior shot back, but he wasn't actually upset. He was quite even-keeled even for a doctor, Maomao thought.

Even if he does have a soft spot for beautiful women.

That was well within expectations for a young man of his age. It wasn't like he was going to find himself blackmailed by someone he'd hopped into bed with.

"These drug trials have me thinking, someone very important must be very ill," Tall Senior said.

So he has noticed.

He didn't yet think that person was the Emperor, or he never would have brought the subject up so casually.

"If they're going to do surgery, they should really have gotten Tairan to handle the anesthesia," he said. "He would be sure to find the best balance of all the factors."

"I suppose they didn't consider him because he was demoted," said Maomao.

"I guess. It was like the light went out of him... He just let himself slip. Once upon a time, I wouldn't have been surprised to see him pass that test."

"Oh hoh."

"Oh, uh, not that I mean you're not perfectly qualified, Maomao."

"Why, thank you."

"I think we've been talking a bit too much. Maybe we should pick up the pace."

"Yes, sir," she said, and the two of them started mortaring faster.

Chapter 8: Anesthesia

The letter indicating that more of Kada's Book had been restored just happened to arrive on Maomao's day off. Since the letter said to come when she had a free day, she headed right over. Normally she would have sent a letter of her own back first, but there was no time for such things.

"Please let him know I'll be coming right away," she said to the messenger who had brought the letter.

Then, practically skipping, she made for Jinshi's office—or, more precisely, the restoration room near the office.

Ka! Da's! Book!

The sight of Maomao prancing along attracted a great many stares. She took a deep breath and suppressed the urge to hop like a bunny.

It was the right decision.

A group of three people in white coats was ahead of her. One walked with a cane and from behind looked almost like an elderly woman.

Maomao cocked her head, puzzled, but continued on the path to the restoration room. The three people walked ahead of her the entire time—until she finally saw that they were all going to the same place.

"Oh, Maomao. Isn't today your day off?" asked the grandmotherly one. It was Luomen. He was with Dr. Liu and another upper physician whose name Maomao didn't know.

"Pops? What are you doing here?" Maomao asked.

"He's not *Pops*. Call him Dr. Kan," said Dr. Liu, giving her a severe look.

They heard footsteps approaching. "I didn't think you'd come quite so soon. If I'd known, I would have sent my message at a different time."

It was Jinshi. Behind him came Hulan, who was grinning as if there were something delightful about all this.

"I heard the book had been repaired," Maomao said. It must

have been Jinshi who had summoned Luomen and the others.

It is a very important book, after all. It only made sense that he would show it to Dr. Liu before he showed it to Maomao. Sure, she might have been the one to find it, but it didn't have her name on it. It would have been wrong to insist that she should see it first.

"May we go in, sir?" Dr. Liu asked.

"Please," said Jinshi, and so the physicians entered the room.

"Aren't you coming, Lady Maomao?" Hulan asked, his face popping up in front of her.

She bared her teeth at him. "Keep away from me."

Jinshi put himself between the two of them. "Hulan, keep your distance. And Maomao, quit making that face." He did not look pleased.

"If you're going to make anyone quit anything, it should be this guy...and it should be his job," she said. Hulan had surpassed Lahan to lead the rankings on her list of people she couldn't stand.

"Even the likes of him can be useful. Unfortunately for me," Jinshi said.

"Yes, sir! I am useful," said Hulan, who was much too close to Maomao again. Jinshi put a hand on Hulan's face to keep him away. "Ahh! The Moon Prince touches my face!" Hulan said.

God, he is *just like Lahan*, Maomao thought with a chill.

"Hulan, you withdraw. Send Basen around to replace you," Jinshi said.

"Understood, sir," Hulan said. He was gone in a flash. His unusual speediness was somehow reminiscent of Chue.

Maomao was able to calm down somewhat now that her archenemy was gone.

"If you summoned Dr. Liu and the others, that must mean that there was something very important on the pages you reconstructed," she said.

"Indeed. We've been focusing the reconstruction on pages showing dissections related to similar cases. Unfortunately, I'm not in a position to know whether what we found will be helpful or not."

"I'm sure it will, sir."

At last Maomao entered the room. The three physicians studying the reconstructed book were the picture of seriousness. Dr. Liu and Luomen both possessed prodigious medical knowledge. The other physician with them was no doubt equally adept.

"If the pages were worthless, they wouldn't be staring at them so intently," said Maomao.

"Good point," Jinshi said, and he sounded somewhat relieved.

Now, let's see if I can get in there...

Maomao came up behind the physicians and took peeks at the new pages. They recorded many cases of typhlitis, but also noted that this condition was frequently confused with appendicitis.

The appendix is that part that looks like a worm, isn't it?

Some of the case studies recorded failures, many of which were on account of complications already present.

So when the inflamed area bursts, there's a temporary relief of the pain.

Presumably, the swelling in the afflicted area caused pressure that caused pain. Likewise, removing the filth would reduce the pain.

Maomao wanted to take a long, hard look at the reconstructed book, but she couldn't get a good view; the three men were all riveted as well. She turned instead to the pages the physicians were done with.

No autopsy diagrams here.

Instead there were pictures of plants.

Maomao narrowed her eyes. "Is that...?"

The reconstructed page bore the heading *Mafeisan*.

Maomao clenched her fists. The names of several herbs were written there, but only one could be deciphered with certainty. Part of the page was missing and couldn't be reconstructed.

"What's that?" Jinshi asked her.

"I've only heard the name before. It's a legendary anesthetic supposedly invented by a superlative doctor."

Maomao went up to Luomen, who was studying a different page. "Pops?"

"That's not what you call me, is it?"

"Dr. Kan? What will you do for anesthetic when you operate on the typhlitis?"

"That's a rather sudden question." Luomen, looking uneasy, tugged on the sleeve of Dr. Liu, who was standing beside him. He seemed to want to confer about how to answer Maomao, presumably because at the moment, the Emperor's illness and its attendant surgery had not yet been made public. "The anesthetic," he said. "What's the status?"

“Still being researched,” answered the upper physician whose name Maomao didn’t know. “We’re planning to use needles to suppress the pain, but it’s not likely to be enough. We’d like to combine it with some sort of orally administered anesthetic.”

In short, they didn’t have anything yet.

“It’s hard to find a safe anesthetic, considering toxicity and dependency, isn’t it?” said Maomao, recalling what Tall Senior had said to her.

“What’s with the look?” Dr. Liu asked. “Are you suggesting that *you* could whip something up if we’d let you?”

“No, sir. But I happen to have an acquaintance who’s experienced in such matters. Perhaps you’d let me confer with them?”

“This person can make anesthetic medicines?” Jinshi asked.

“I can’t say for certain. Most of the ingredients on this list are illegible, and we don’t know how potent the effects might be. But this person does know a lot about these things.”

“Who is it?”

Maomao smiled.

The one ingredient on the list that she’d been able to make out was thornapple.

Chapter 9: To Everyone a Purpose

Several years before, there had been a woman who had faked a suicide and fled the court.

Her name was Suirei, and she was a member of the Shi clan—which had been annihilated—as well as a granddaughter of the former emperor. As a result of the special circumstances of her birth and her past mistakes, her survival could not be made public, and she currently lived with Ah-Duo.

This young woman had medical knowledge—she and her mentor had devised a drug that could put people into a comatose state and then bring them "back to life." Among the drug's ingredients was thornapple.

As for Ah-Duo, she had stepped down from her position as high consort and had left the rear palace, and now she lived in an isolated villa.

I'm not sure I get how it's different from the rear palace. She just lives somewhere else now, Maomao thought, although she wasn't about to say it out loud. She was in a carriage, clattering along toward Ah-Duo's villa.

She heard children's voices:

"Ha ha ha!"

"Wait for meee!"

They were the children of the Shi clan, whom Ah-Duo harbored along with Suirei. Chou-u, the little troublemaker of the pleasure district, should have been here by all rights as well, but as a side effect of the resurrection drug he had lost his memory, and therefore could walk a different path from these other children. So long as the ones who were here remembered their former clan, they couldn't go out in public.

You have to take the really, really long view here.

From the perspective of lifespan, Ah-Duo would die before these kids—they would outlive her, assuming they didn't get sick or seriously injured. Was there someone who could and would look after them until the bitter end, keeping their secret safe all the

while?

There were two men with the children—no, two women dressed like men. Ah-Duo and Suirei both frequently dressed in men's clothing, perhaps because it was easier to move in, or perhaps out of personal preference.

“Lady Ah-Duo, it’s been ever so long!” drawled Maomao’s guide, Chue. She bowed her head politely, and Maomao did the same. She felt a little funny, though: The last time they’d met was when Ah-Duo told her about her relationship to Jinshi.

“I’m not sure I would say *ever* so long,” said Ah-Duo, instructing her ladies-in-waiting to shepherd the children away. The kids looked disappointed, but the ladies herded them off.

Maomao had the same thought every time she visited the villa: *They really look up to her, don’t they?*

“Shall we take this conversation inside?” Ah-Duo asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” Maomao said. Considering what they were there to discuss, she was eager to speak in private.

Maomao had come to ask Suirei about anesthetics. Dr. Liu and the other physicians were working themselves to the bone to implement better treatments for His Majesty, but anesthesia was one place there was still room for improvement. The very fact that they were willing to entertain Maomao’s suggestion was evidence that they would take all the help they could get.

Or in this case, maybe I should say they’re grasping at straws.

The small company went to one of the rooms in the villa. It had a modest table and four chairs; an attendant prepared tea and then promptly left.

It was only Ah-Duo, Suirei, Maomao, and Chue in the room together. Ah-Duo gestured for them to sit, and they did so.

Ah-Duo folded her legs and turned to Maomao. “Now, I hear you have business with Sui. What is it you want?”

“I’d like to ask...Sui...for her medical knowledge,” Maomao said. She wasn’t sure it was appropriate to use the name Suirei, so she settled on using the shortened form as well.

“What do you think, Sui?” Ah-Duo asked.

“I have no opinion,” the young woman replied. “I’ll follow your orders, Lady Ah-Duo.”

“Ah, you’re no fun.” Ah-Duo took a smoking pipe in her hand and twirled it deftly. It didn’t look like she actually smoked; she just enjoyed spinning it. It reminded Maomao of the way Jinshi would twirl his brush between his fingers.

“What, precisely, do you want Sui to do?” Ah-Duo asked.

Maomao took that as her cue to bring out the item she had

brought with her. It was a chest of thin wood. She opened the lid to reveal a sheet of paper, along with some charcoal to protect it from humidity and something to keep bugs away.

"What's this?" Suirei inquired.

"Are you familiar with a medicine called mafeisan?"

Suirei paused, choosing her words carefully. "I've heard of it, just once. It sounds to me like something out of a fairy tale—a drug that puts you to sleep and keeps pain at bay." She seemed to be quietly scanning the reconstructed page.

"What would you do if I told you that drug exists?"

"*I* wouldn't do anything."

"Even if I said it contains thornapple?"

"I see that's what's written here. But that's not a medicine; that's poison, isn't it? What are you going to use it for?"

Ah-Duo observed this conversation closely but quietly; Chue was squirming like she could barely restrain herself from offering some piquant interjection.

"We would use it for surgery," said Maomao.

Suirei nodded: This, it appeared, made sense to her. "You're suggesting temporarily stopping the heart to prevent pain during surgery?" She was speaking of the resurrection drug she herself had made.

"We wouldn't go quite that far. Do you think it could be made mild enough to simply induce unconsciousness?"

"I think this is a road you'd be better off not taking." Suirei wasn't biting, not even a little. "Thornapple is an extremely potent poison. I understand wanting to make things easier on the patient by preventing them from feeling pain—believe me, I do—but the very fact that you're here seeking knowledge from a criminal like me tells me how cornered you must feel. Who do you propose to use this anesthetic on?"

Suirei was a sharp one.

"I can only say that it's someone very important," Maomao replied. It wasn't her place to identify the person exactly.

Ah-Duo, however, was kind enough to guess. "Oh hoh. Has that poor boy's illness started up again?"

That's not very respectful, Maomao thought. "That poor boy" was probably Ah-Duo's way of referring to the Emperor.

The question is, how do I answer?

Maomao shot Chue a sidelong glance. She just grinned and

didn't do anything to halt the conversation, so Maomao decided to go on.

"I don't know who you're referring to, but what was the nature of his illness before?" Maomao asked, careful not to use any names.

"Well, let's see. I remember he was unwell for quite a while. The physicians probably have records more precise than my memories. All I could really tell you about is the fights with his grandmother."

Ah-Duo seemed to remember it all quite clearly.

"Ahem... Yes, his grandmother. She was a very strong person, so let's call her... Oh, I don't know. Let's say 'the empress regnant.'"

That's not a code name!

Chue groaned quietly, but she made a circle with her hands, a sign of approval, so the conversation went on.

"So this man fought with this...empress regnant?" Maomao asked.

"Ah, yes, I like that name. Much easier to work with. You want to hear the story? One of them was a lady more than eighty years old, who in spite of her age showed absolutely no inclination to step off the political stage, and the other was, let's say, a crown prince in his rebellious phase. They were at each other's throats so loudly that I could hear it all the way in my place, and the crown prince would always want me to listen to him complain about it afterward. Somewhere in the middle of it all, though, he looked like he was in genuine distress."

She's straight-out saying "crown prince"! She's not even trying to hide it!

Chue made a disapproving *X*. "Now now, Lady Ah-Duo, we can't do that. I need you to be evasive about his identity," she drawled. "Otherwise, what is Miss Chue supposed to report back to everyone?"

"It's just us here; it's fine. I'm sure you can think of some way to talk around it, Chue."

"Hmph! Miss Chue is going to be working overtime..."

"Do forgive me." Ah-Duo set down her pipe and sipped from her teacup.

"What kinds of things did they fight about?" Maomao asked.

"I wonder if I'm allowed to tell you... Well, I suppose it's fine. In her twilight years, the empress regnant began to show signs of dementia."

That earned a jolt from both Maomao and Suirei. Chue alone looked unfazed, starting in on the snacks.

"But then, involvement in politics..."

...would have been impossible, Maomao thought.

"Don't misunderstand. It's not that she forgot everything she once knew. She was just inexplicably careless sometimes. But still..."

"It sounds like something unpleasant happened because of it."

"Yes. If I said it involved I-sei Province eighteen years ago, would you understand?"

Maomao didn't say anything, but she thought, *Now, here's a subject I've had my fill of!*

She and Chue, among others, had been over every inch of that area the previous year.

"At the time, I'm given to understand, a letter arrived regarding the Yi clan's rebellion. By some mistake, the former emperor's seal ended up affixed to it. That was the incident that led Yoh... I mean, the current Emperor, to realize that something was wrong."

I'm scared out of my wits, here.

The Emperor and the empress regnant might have been family, but it wasn't like they had seen each other all the time. Worse yet, there were few if any who could have remonstrated with the woman who had been effectively the greatest power in the nation. Even if there had been signs, no one could have said anything.

With his grandmother holding the reins of power and his father a puppet, the crown prince had decided to do what he could—yes, that would be more than a little stressful.

"You said his symptoms subsided, though, didn't you?"

"Yes. I don't know if this was a good thing or not, but first the empress regnant and then the former emperor died, one after the other."

In other words, the source of the stress had been removed.

"The coronation kept him busy, but taking over the work itself turned out to be surprisingly simple. Besides, he was able to rest during the mourning period."

"I feel I have to ask: What was the cause of the empress regnant's demise?"

"You can relax. It wasn't an assassination. She simply died of old age."

"I figured."

The empress regnant had been an old woman; even the former emperor had been more than sixty years old. Maomao hoped their deaths had really been natural.

"If the old condition is bothering him again, I wonder if it means there's some new worry he's suffering from."

"Some new worry..."

Maomao mentally reviewed the Emperor's non-empress-regnant relations. There was one. The one who was officially the Emperor's younger brother, who had recently spent a year away from the royal capital engaged in a battle against the plague of insects.

The Emperor would have to be beside himself about his own son.

This person was Ah-Duo's child as well.

Does she know the truth?

Did she know that her precious little boy had burned a brand into his own side? Maomao suspected that accounted for a substantial percentage of the Emperor's stress.

Suirei let out a great sigh. "All the more reason I don't think my knowledge will be of any use."

She still wasn't biting.

"Didn't you say you would follow my orders, whatever they were?" asked Ah-Duo.

"I can't give poison to someone that important, not even at your command, milady. And the only thing I know how to make *is* a poison—it enables a resurrection in name only."

"It's not a poison," Maomao replied. "In the right dose, it's a medicine."

"Someone may be trying to entrap Lady Ah-Duo. What would you do then?"

There was some logic to what Suirei was saying—a lot of logic, in fact. Ah-Duo's villa was a veritable haven of dangerous elements, if anyone cared to look there. Ah-Duo herself was in a unique position, kept outside the rear palace even though she had been dismissed as a consort.

The wrong faction could easily see her as a political enemy.

So, what to do?

If only there were some way to convince them...

That was when Maomao remembered, of all things, a name.

"Tairan," she said.

It was most unusual for her to remember someone's name. Maybe it was because she had heard it recently, or perhaps she

remembered it for its associations with the episode with Suirei.

"Tairan..." Suirei murmured, her dark expression becoming even darker.

"That's right. A physician at court. Three years ago, he was relieved of his duty and demoted because of you. I hear he used to be an excellent doctor."

Suirei wouldn't look at Maomao.

"He was especially gifted at formulating anesthetics, I'm told. Sui, you approached Dr. Tairan precisely to learn what he knew about that field, didn't you?"

Suirei was silent. Ah-Duo and Chue likewise said nothing, but only watched her.

"He's looking for you, you know. I don't know what's going through his head, but he's desperate enough to find you that he even asked me about it."

"I presume he wants to kill me," Suirei said.

"I don't think so. If you ask me, he looked like he was worried about you." Maomao, at least, hadn't sensed any desire on Tairan's part to do Suirei harm. "You took the wind out of his sails and left him in a proverbial ditch. It was so bad that he even failed a selection exam he should really have passed."

"And what? You want me to apologize to him?"

"No. I won't say a word to him about you."

"Miss Chue would be in very dire straits if you did!" Chue piped up, striking one of her trademark cute poses. "She'd have to *destroy the evidence*!"

"I promise I won't say anything, so don't say such unsettling things," Maomao replied.

"I do feel bad for Tairan," Suirei said. "I had immense respect for his knowledge."

Respect, huh?

So, Maomao realized, Suirei could be forthright about her feelings when she wanted to.

"Don't you think we could pass along *your* knowledge back to Dr. Tairan?" Maomao asked.

"I can't be sure it would help," Suirei replied.

"True enough. But one thing I think we can say: You've tried using thornapple more times than anyone else here."

Maomao knew that Suirei had sacrificed innumerable rats to her experiments—and of course, she had used the drug herself. The

trembling in her hand was the result of her experiment.

"The more case studies we have, the better. The degree of danger would be vastly reduced in the experiments that we're about to do, Sui, if you would so much as offer us your records." Maomao stared hard at Suirei, unwilling to let her get away. "It's not like we're going to use it on the Emperor immediately. There must be other patients who would benefit from mafeisan. What if I simply told you we would use it for them?"

In addition to using it in the current drug trials, they could test whether it would be useful in surgery. It was hardly risk-free, but it might be better than not being able to do anything about the pain.

The Emperor on the one hand, the lives of his subjects on the other. Maomao wasn't sure how she felt about that, but she had no choice except to close her eyes to it.

Suirei gave a defeated sigh.

"Does that mean you'll do it?" Ah-Duo pressed.

After a long moment, Suirei said, "Yes, I will. Give me a little while."

Maomao clenched a fist in triumph: She finally had Suirei's agreement.

"And so Miss Chue told her little brother that the duck would be especially tasty if we ate it now!"

"That's true. Ducks *are* most delicious when they're young."

While they waited for Suirei, Ah-Duo, Maomao, and Chue chatted together. Mostly it was Chue showing off her sleight of hand or gossiping about her family, which was all well and good in Maomao's eyes. All Maomao had to offer were jokes from the brothel, which tended to fall flat at court; meanwhile, if she tried to chitchat about social matters, she was afraid she might say something she shouldn't.

"But that duck of ours, she's too smart for her own good. She's got the children on her side. So I couldn't—"

"I'm back," Suirei said. She entered carrying a sheaf of paper. "These are all of the ingredients I could recall. I burned all of my past materials, so it's only what was in my memory. There may be some oversights. You'll just have to work with what's there."

She handed the notes to Maomao—it was a lengthy list of poisonous herbs, headed by thornapple.

"Deadly poisons all, eh?" Maomao said.

“Yes. The drug does cause death, after all, even if only temporarily.”

“At least you wouldn’t feel pain.”

“Unless you were to wake up…” Suirei didn’t sound the least bit enthused, but she had written careful notes. “I’ve also added Shaohnese knowledge, although I haven’t tested it yet.”

Shaoh was the country bordering Li, and its former shrine maiden was among those hiding at Ah-Duo’s villa.

“If the goal is to prevent the patient from feeling pain, I should think you could use some of these drugs as well,” Suirei said, writing down another list of names.

“Probably not this one,” said Maomao. Suirei had written *cannabis*.

“Why not?” she asked.

“It works well at first, but it creates dependency, and the body can become used to it, weakening the effect.”

“I gather the standard way to administer it is with warm wine. It should work very well the first time, at least.”

“I’m not sure we want to involve wine,” Maomao replied.

“I see—because it would blunt the pain but increase circulation.”

It was true, you could dull pain by making a person slightly drunk. There was no perfect anesthetic. The task was to find something suited to the situation and which had the fewest side effects.

“What about needles?” Suirei said.

“I gather they’re already exploring that possibility. The effectiveness depends on the individual body.”

“True, needles alone don’t inspire much confidence.”

“You need something else if you’re going to cut open their stomach. Maybe we could just knock them unconscious?”

“What if the person who went unconscious could have you beheaded for lèse-majesté?”

“We’d just have to explain the situation and tell them to suck it up.”

“I tremble to think if they started thrashing from the pain.”

“We’d just have to cope somehow.”

“Even if you could, no one else at court would approve.”

“Ugh. The Imperial family is such a pain.”

“Agreed.”

During the second half of the conversation, Maomao and Suirei both became quite garrulous.

"I didn't know you could talk this much, Sui," Ah-Duo said with amusement, sipping her tea.

"You know how it is, Lady Ah-Duo," said Chue, still working her way through the snacks. "When two aficionados get to geek out together, they can really get going!"

"I doubt we've mentioned anything the physicians aren't already trying," Suirei said, clutching the notes. "I assume any doctor worth his salt would have already done these things more than once."

"True enough," said Maomao.

In medicine, there were no shortcuts—only case studies and trials in sufficient quantity got results.

"Medicine is tricky," Suirei said. "You might think that if you cut the amount in half, the person would be asleep for half as long, but it's not that simple."

"Yeah. The wrong amount sometimes doesn't have any effect at all," Maomao agreed. She would know; she'd tried it on her arm.

"May I offer my personal opinion?" Suirei must have been talking too much, for she drank some tea now as she spoke. "I don't know what kind of person the Emperor is. But is he really the sort to refuse surgery just because he's afraid of the pain? If you can work out an effective treatment, I have a sense that the anesthetic itself isn't that important. I think what's really going to matter is the before and after."

"The before?" Maomao asked. The "after" she understood: Many were the surgical patients who had died from infection after a procedure.

"I mean whether the Emperor has any inclination to undergo surgery to begin with. And whether the people around him will let him."

Maomao paused, then at length she said, "That's not our job." Jinshi or the other high officials would have to take care of it.

"Fair enough. In any case, I'll send you any new information I learn about the anesthetic. I think it would be more efficient for you to look into what drugs you'll use after the surgery."

"Understood." Maomao put the notes into the folds of her robes.

"Tairan might ask about me when he sees those notes," Suirei said—not just because of the content, but because of the

handwriting.

"If he does, I'll tell him they're personal effects. You left them in your room."

"Please do."

It was most likely true that Suirei respected Tairan—which was exactly why she didn't want to be involved with him.

"All right!" Maomao said and smacked herself on the cheeks.

I'll do whatever I can do. And whatever I can't, I'll leave to someone else.

She wasn't under any illusions that she could do it all by herself. She wondered, sometimes, just how skilled you would have to be to grow proud enough to think that you could.

Chapter 10: Gyouyoh

From the time he was born, everything had been decided for Gyouyoh: what he would do, what he would be. As the emperor's only son, that was the position he had been given.

There was always someone watching him; very rarely could he do what he pleased. The closest he came to freedom was when he was playing with his milk siblings.

"It's time to eat," Gaoshun informed him, marking an end to administrative business and the constant sitting it involved. Gaoshun, a milk sibling two years older than Gyouyoh, had been temporarily assigned to Zuigetsu.

Really, Gyouyoh had been told, it should have been not Gaoshun but some other member of the Ma clan assigned to Zuigetsu. As Gyouyoh's bodyguard and second-in-command, Gaoshun—although he had been known by a different name at the time—could hardly be replaced. But in Gyouyoh's mind, that was all the more reason he should look after Zuigetsu.

For lunch, Gyouyoh was served soup with no actual solid ingredients and congee that didn't appear to contain a single grain of rice. His meals had been this way for more than two weeks now, and he'd lost a fair amount of weight. His cheeks were starting to become sunken, a fact he concealed with special whitening powder that Gaoshun made for him.

There was also another meal too, separate from the congee. If they only brought him a sick man's food, there were those who might guess, well, that he was sick. For that reason, Gaoshun also brought him an ordinary meal.

"Take this before you eat, sir."

"Must I?"

"I'm afraid you must."

Gaoshun handed Gyouyoh some medicine with a uniquely acrid smell. Initially they had mixed it with fruit juice or honey to soften the taste, but although this diluted the flavor it increased the amount that Gyouyoh had to drink, so he had asked them to stop.

He drank down the medicine, then stuck his spoon into the glue-like congee. It was suffused with flavors of salt and meat; in some other form, it might have tasted a little better.

After about three bites, Gyouyoh put down his spoon.

"Does it hurt, sir?"

"Do you even have to ask?"

His chronic stomach pain had been getting gradually worse. Sometimes he felt nauseous or got low-grade fevers. He'd experienced this pain before, and had assumed the same treatment would do the trick—but there was no sign of the condition improving.

"What are the physicians doing?" he demanded.

"My sincere apologies, sir," Gaoshun said.

"They're not lying about my illness, are they?"

"The possibility seems remote, sir."

Gyouyoh knew there was no point in lashing out at Gaoshun. If he didn't release his feelings on *someone,* though, there was a risk that they would escape him in public.

There were only so many people around whom Gyouyoh could be vulnerable, and Gaoshun was one of them. He leaned on Gaoshun's good grace, just as Zuigetsu did.

Even among the members of the Ma clan, Gyouyoh thought, Gaoshun was particularly well put together.

The scene was interrupted by the sound of footsteps, and then there was a voice on the other side of the door.

"You can't come in," Gaoshun answered. "His Majesty is taking his meal."

"I certainly can. Do you know who I am?"

Gyouyoh did indeed know who it was, even through a closed door, and dejection overtook him. Gaoshun swiftly hid the half-eaten congee and replaced it with the ordinary meal.

In came a group centered around a man roughly fifty years old. He was tall and thin, and looked young despite his age—a gift of his bloodline, perhaps.

"You must pardon my rudeness in interrupting your meal," the man said. He approached with an unctuous smile, but Gaoshun positioned himself between Gyouyoh and the newcomer. Gyouyoh's bodyguards were likewise keeping a watchful eye from just outside the room.

"If you knew it was rude, then let me suggest you shouldn't

have come," Gyouyoh replied.

"Ha ha ha! Your words are harsh, sire. Are you really so stern even with your uncle?"

His uncle: that was to say, the older brother of Gyouyoh's mother, Anshi. His name was Hao.

"Mm. So you propose that because you are my uncle, you can interrupt my lunch?" Gyouyoh said, stabbing a piece of cubed meat with his chopsticks.

"Heavens, sire, perish the thought." Hao waved his hands emphatically in a gesture of dismissal, but showed no sign of actually leaving the room.

Anshi herself was not terribly ambitious—but her family was another matter. Maternal relatives they might have been, but they were almost sickeningly covetous. They had sent Anshi into the rear palace to ingratiate themselves with the former emperor, who had been solely interested in very young girls. Just as they had hoped, she became pregnant—with Gyouyoh—and a member of their family had been first empress, and now Empress Dowager.

The empress regnant—Gyouyoh's grandmother and the former empress dowager—had been alert to that ambition. That was why, so long as she had been alive, no maternal relative of Gyouyoh's had been appointed to any important position.

However, after the empress regnant had died and Gyouyoh had ascended to the throne, his family began to assert themselves. Anshi's father was long dead, but her older half-brother had no qualms about throwing his weight around.

There was no one at court who could take a firm hand with them—they were the Emperor's family, after all. And they had only grown more arrogant after the destruction of the Shi clan.

Part of the reason Gyouyoh was intent on raising up the Gyoku clan was to counterbalance Hao and his kin. It might have looked like a nasty move, but he had no choice; he had to avoid being politically dominated by his own subjects.

As for Anshi, she didn't have very fond feelings for her half-brother. Neither did Gyouyoh, but it wasn't good for him to show that outwardly. The slightest display of displeasure on his part could send any number of heads rolling.

"Surely you could have a more pleasant meal than this," Hao said, eyeing Gyouyoh's food. If there had been nothing there but congee and plain soup, Hao would certainly have suspected

something was up.

"It would only mean more trouble making sure I had enough tasters," Gyouyoh replied, forcing himself to put the bite of meat in his mouth. He raised his cup, and Gaoshun obligingly filled it with wine.

"Of course, of course. One never knows when or where an attempt upon your exalted life might come. Particularly from... Well, those western folk are such barbarians, you know. They and all who share their blood."

It was all too obvious what Hao was trying to say. He did not like the current Crown Prince. In terms of lineage, the Crown Prince was the grandson of Hao's younger half-sister Anshi, so Hao himself was the prince's great-uncle. However, the Crown Prince's mother was Gyokuyou. Hao might be a blood relation of the prince, but power would come to reside in the hands of the Gyoku clan.

That alone had to be enough to make Hao sweat. Just when he thought the empress regnant was finally out of the way and he could start wielding power, it turned out that his relative Anshi was passive—and then a clan that he despised as a bunch of western barbarians received a name before he did!

Hao had been dropping roundabout hints that he wanted a name for a long time now, but Gyouyoh had consistently ignored them.

"You may be my uncle, but I must ask you to refrain from offering your opinion on the Crown Prince or his bloodline. This is something I have already decided."

"Of course, sire, of course. My sincere apologies. What if I were to simply suggest that to me, it appears as if the Crown Prince has only *thus far* assumed his position?" Hao's eyes narrowed. It made it look as if, behind his hands, which were clasped in front of him in a gesture of supplication, he was smiling. "It was the same with Consort Lihua's first royal child. She gave birth to a little boy, and thus a crown prince."

"Lihua is an upper consort. Is there some sort of problem?" the Emperor asked.

"Heavens, no. I merely...can't help thinking. What if that child were alive today?"

"That matter is finished." Gyouyoh gave his cup a shake, watching the red liquid within it ripple but not drinking a drop.

Yes, that was over long ago. It was widely believed that his

child with Ah-Duo was dead. For Hao, it would have been most convenient had that child been alive. If he could become a guardian for Ah-Duo, who had no political backer of her own, he could continue to exercise his influence into the next generation.

And, most unfortunately, that was what Gyouyoh wanted as well.

"Oh, sire, I'm sure he would have grown into a fine young man. Much like Master Zuigetsu."

Gyouyoh only glowered silently at Hao—but then his vision was blocked.

Hao made a choked sound, his eyes almost bulging out of his head. He found a sword inches from the tip of his nose.

Who had put it there? Gaoshun. He was ordinarily so put-upon, taciturn, with a perpetual furrow in his brow—and meanwhile, people mocked him as a henpecked husband. Not to mention that thanks to Zuigetsu's selfish whim, he'd had to spend nearly seven years pretending to be a eunuch.

You could call this man a wimp to his face and he would hardly look fazed—but now he had a sword on Hao.

"Wh-What's the meaning of this?!" Hao demanded. His bodyguards had reacted immediately. This being the Emperor's chamber, they were not permitted to wear swords, but they were still three imposing men.

"I would ask you the same question," Gaoshun replied. "What made you think that you could speak the Moon Prince's name and emerge unscathed?" His gaze was even sharper than his sword, and likewise leveled directly at Hao.

“At this time there is only one person with the right to use that name,” Gaoshun continued. “His Majesty himself. I don’t think you know your place. I might even say you’ve arrogated to yourself what belongs to heaven—a serious crime.”

Gaoshun was a particularly mellow man even among the members of the Ma clan. To see him moved to do what he was doing spoke to just how far Hao had overstepped. To speak Zuigetsu’s name aloud was as good as to assert that he held a position equal to the Emperor’s.

Hao’s guards didn’t move—they couldn’t. Gaoshun would lop off Hao’s head before they could stop him. For that matter, the guards would probably end up dead as well—Gaoshun was just that good a swordsman.

Even back when Gyouyoh and Ah-Duo had wrestled with him two against one, they had never stood a chance.

It crossed Gyouyoh’s mind that it might be nice to simply let Hao lose his head here and now. It would certainly be a load off his mind. But the cleanup would be such a headache. Not just the actual cleanup of the mess in the room—Gyouyoh wanted to avoid weakening Anshi’s family by eliminating Hao. Without the Shi clan, the balance of power at court was skewed. It wouldn’t be a good idea to reduce the number of factions ever further.

Gyouyoh raised his hand, and Gaoshun lowered his sword.

Hao glared at Gaoshun, his face absolutely pale. “What *right* do you have to assault me in this manner?!” he exclaimed, spittle flying from his mouth.

“None. I have no status,” Gaoshun replied, and it was true. Members of the Ma clan were never given official positions, and Gaoshun was no exception. “However, I am the sword of the Emperor. And I simply did what the Emperor’s sword ought.”

“He’s right. No one said you could call Zuigetsu by his name. Only I may speak that name,” Gyouyoh said. Hao bit his lip. He was Gyouyoh’s maternal relative—but not a member of the Imperial family, and it was forbidden to speak the names of the highest members of royalty.

For better or worse, Hao was a man who knew his limits. He had his sprinkling of ambition and his helping of foolishness, but no more.

If he had also been a man of exceptional talents, that might have been a problem. It would have made him hard to handle. But the occasional act of idiocy on his part gave an opportunity to tug the reins and remind him who was the master. He would cling to his position as the Emperor's relative, but he had no thoughts of taking over. He lacked the backbone to dream of putting the crown on his own head.

"Let me ask you a question," Gyouyoh said. "Do you think it advisable for you to stay here any longer after that display?"

There was a beat, and then Hao answered, "My abject apologies, sire." His attitude had completely turned around. "I will visit you again, in all humility."

With that, he left.

Once his footsteps had completely vanished, Gyouyoh rubbed his stomach.

"Does it hurt, sir?" Gaoshun asked.

"Yes... And it got worse just now."

The piece of pork he had eaten was coming back up, along with stomach acid.

"What do you suppose Master Hao is thinking?" asked Gaoshun.

"Oh, I should think it's obvious. He wants me to restore Zui as crown prince."

"I see, sir." All the sharpness had left Gaoshun's gaze, and his voice was once more like it always was. "But you have no interest in doing so, do you?"

Gyouyoh paused, then said, "Mm." He set down his cup of wine, not clearly saying either yes or no.

Chapter 11: The Special Unit

It came half expectedly, half out of the blue.

The physicians were summoned to a conference room. Maomao was asked to attend in the nominal position of secretary, but when she saw who was gathered, she had a pretty good idea what they were there to talk about.

Dr. Liu, Luomen, and Tall and Short Seniors were there. Mid-Height Peer was missing. Instead she saw Tianyu, goggling at the room around him, and a collection of other accomplished and capable doctors.

Perhaps most interesting of all, Dr. Tairan was there as well. Maomao had given him Suirei's notes just the other day—telling him, as she had promised, that they were left behind after Suirei's death. One thing was different from before: Dr. Tairan walked tall, much taller than Maomao might have expected from someone derided as a coward.

Maybe he knew I was BSing about the notes being "personal effects."

Maomao also spotted a woman she'd seen during the selection exam. In fact, everyone there had passed the same examination.

This has to do with the Emperor, no question.

Normally, Maomao would have expected to be excluded just like Mid-Height Peer. The whole calling-her-in-as-a-secretary thing must have been Jinshi's doing, or possibly at Luomen's intercession. It did annoy her, though, that Tianyu was there on his own merits.

In spite of being a trash human being!

Even Maomao had to admit that surgical skill was one area in which he couldn't be faulted.

Maomao seated herself beside Luomen and started taking notes on a pad. Luomen was the center of discussions about the medicines involved, while Dr. Liu was leading talk about the surgery itself. There was another group, too, one that was researching medicines for after the procedure.

Before surgery, during surgery, after surgery.

Those, Maomao realized, were the groups into which they had been divided.

Some weather-beaten old papers were carefully arranged on the table in front of Dr. Liu—the reconstructed remnants of Kada's Book. The pages showed illustrations of an autopsy. Judging by the fact that only physicians were present and the door was locked, the intention must have been for everyone to see the pages.

Did Jinshi give those to him?

Any ordinary person would look askance at the book, but to the likes of Maomao and Tianyu the content was absolutely fascinating. Of particular interest to Maomao was that the autopsy illustration included copious notes about diseases of the internal organs; she hoped to have a chance to study it closely later.

I didn't get a good look before, she thought. There simply hadn't been time.

"I want to hear how each of our subjects is progressing," Dr. Liu said.

Tall Senior stood up. "Currently, we've confirmed that the medicine is effective. However..."

There was an obvious difference between the group that had received the real medicine and the one that had gotten the placebo. The real medicine worked. However, there were variations by individual, and even within the group that received the drug, some people got better and some didn't. The ones who were cured appeared to be those who'd had mild symptoms to begin with. Still, the condition seemed to worsen more slowly than in the placebo group.

Luomen then elaborated a bit on what Tall Senior had reported. Dr. Liu looked as if it was all about as he had expected. Maomao rapidly took notes. She'd known all this already, so writing it down was easy.

After that, it was the surgical team's turn to report. First, Tairan and an upper physician skilled in the use of needles talked about anesthesia. In addition to the use of herbal medicines, they discussed the possibilities of alcohol, needles, pressure, and cold to reduce pain. Of course, the more a method eliminated pain, the more dangerous it was. They mentioned a number of dangerous names like thornapple, wolfsbane, mandrake, poppy, and cannabis.

When you're cutting open someone's stomach, pain is probably inevitable, Maomao thought. The question was how much the

patient could take. There were plenty of legends and tales of great heroes having surgery done on them without minding the pain at all—but if they could blunt the discomfort somehow, it would decrease the chance of the patient going berserk during the operation.

Should anesthetic herbs be considered medicine, or poison? It was a difficult distinction to draw.

Having talked about the possibilities, Tairan then suggested an anesthetic that was a compound of several different drugs. He would not use alcohol, but a concoction including sleeping medications to take the edge off the pain.

If we're really lucky, we'll be able to perform the operation before he wakes up.

Maomao continued taking down notes, trying her best to be accurate. There was one other person taking notes, a physician, so if she made any errors, they could compare her notes with his.

She was surprised to realize that research on the surgical procedure had come so far.

Maybe Kada's Book helped them.

Once the procedure was over, she fully intended to have a better look at it.

"Concerning the illness itself, while this is not unqualified, we believe we've found a way to solve the problem at its source."

Maomao's eyes widened and she looked on with undisguised interest. This subject was so important that Dr. Liu himself was doing the presentation.

"If it should happen that the problem is not in the cecum but in the appendix, we'll prevent any further recurrences by removing it. The autopsy illustrations have shown us that it often *is* the appendix that's the actual problem."

"Maomao," Luomen said, nudging her. She'd been so busy watching Dr. Liu that she'd forgotten to take any notes, and she hurried to catch up.

The appendix: If she remembered correctly, that was the little thing hanging there like a worm that she'd seen when they'd done their dissections.

"Are we sure it's all right to remove the appendix?" asked one physician. Maomao was grateful to him: It was exactly what she wanted to ask.

"It's reputed to be a relatively safe organ to remove," Dr. Liu

replied. “At the very least, we know the damage would be far worse if we were to simply let filth continue to collect in the appendix until it burst.”

That would send the stuff all over the inside of the abdomen, likely causing other illnesses and finally death.

Kada’s Book, sitting before Dr. Liu, contained detailed drawings of the appendix. The fact that the book was sitting there suggested just how much help it had been.

“Has this surgery been tested?” someone asked.

“Yes, it has. We’ve been watching the patients’ progress, and it appears to have an eighty percent success rate.”

“What happened to the other twenty percent?”

That was the more important subject versus the cases that succeeded.

“In ten percent, the appendix had already burst, causing peritonitis. We removed the appendix and tried to clean out as much of the filth as we could, but the condition ultimately claimed their lives. In the remaining ten percent, toxins entered via the surgical incision and caused infection, and the patient died without ever fully recovering.”

Twenty percent. Were those odds high, or low?

It’s not a very comforting number, that’s for sure. Yet at the same time, it was a far greater success rate than had been possible with the methods available before this.

“What do we do if the appendix isn’t the site of the problem?” asked a physician.

“We’ll just have to cross that bridge if and when we come to it,” Dr. Liu replied. It was as good as telling them that they had no time. Maomao continued to make her notes, trying to keep them as objective as possible.

Finally, there was an explanation of how treatment would be handled after the surgery. It mostly concerned antiseptic drugs and how to maintain hygiene so that nothing would become infected.

I guess our group doesn’t have much to offer His Majesty, Maomao thought. If they were working on the assumption that they were going to operate, then he was probably past the point of being cured with herbal medicine.

“Pardon me, but may I ask something? Just to be certain?” said the physician who had talked about anesthetics, raising his hand.

“Go ahead.”

"Who are we going to use the fruits of all this research on?"

It was a real question—but he was "just being certain." Most likely, everyone in the room already knew the answer.

"It's precisely the person that you're all thinking of," Dr. Liu said. He didn't elaborate. Maomao didn't know if that was the right choice, but the very fact that he chose not to showed just how uncertain the endeavor on which Dr. Liu was embarking was.

They were going to do surgery on the Emperor. Meaning they were going to give him drugs that could poison him if they made the slightest error, then cut open his abdomen with a knife, possibly cut out one of his internal organs—and even if the surgery succeeded, he would need meticulous attention after the procedure.

If everyone here were to be considered involved, it could gut the entire medical department.

Therefore, they had to keep specific knowledge of the surgery to the minimum number of people.

Dr. Liu, my dad, maybe a few others.

To fail would be to effectively sign their own death warrants. It was even possible that punishment could extend as far as the ninth degree of their family.

Which means I'd be killed too.

The freak strategist and Lahan would be caught up in it; there was nothing they could do about that, but she wondered if it might be possible to at least spare Lahan's Brother somehow.

Of course, Maomao couldn't picture Luomen, whom she respected so deeply, making such a mistake.

"I'm going to read off a list of names," Dr. Liu said. "I want those people to stay here."

He started reading. Every person whose name he called looked grim but resolved. Well, except one—Tianyu looked cool as a cucumber.

He's got real skills...if nothing *else,* Maomao thought with a click of her tongue.

Dr. Liu had one more name to read. "Maomao."

Hrk?!

Maomao jumped a little when she heard her name. She saw Short Senior leave the room, casting a worried glance in her direction. She knew how he felt: She sure hadn't expected her name to be among those called. The drugs she had been making wouldn't be much use after the surgery. She got up, staring openly around

the room, and worked her way toward Dr. Liu. Tall Senior was still there too; his name must have been in there somewhere.

"You look like a woman who doesn't know why she was on that list," said Dr. Liu.

"Yes, sir," Maomao replied.

"It's simple. You're Luomen's blood relative. If they're going to wipe out whole families, then better to bring you into the fold than someone else who otherwise wouldn't be involved. Fewer victims that way."

"I see, sir."

It certainly was a logical enough reason.

"As a bonus, if anything happens, you'll be an easy way to get Grand Commandant Kan involved. Luomen would be a good start for that, but a little insurance never hurt anyone."

"I *see*, sir," Maomao said, narrowing her eyes. They were probably hoping that, if the death penalty came for them, the freak strategist would kick and scream and go on a rampage and get the sentence vacated.

Dr. Liu always seemed to be one step ahead of her.

Maomao spent the next several days being told what the surgery would entail—but in keeping with the principle of a time and a place for everyone, her main job was going to be choosing and compounding the drugs they would use.

At Luomen's instruction, she bought the finest herbs and put them to use with the utmost care. Practically speaking, she'd been inducted into the postsurgical care team. Tall Senior was part of the same group, but was also receiving instruction for how to assist during the surgery; they must have decided he would be useful in both circumstances.

Short Senior, meanwhile, was continuing the experiments with the drugs. Patients whose condition worsened would be given an anesthetic, receive surgery, and then their progress tracked.

The anesthetic was the biggest problem. The most effective anesthetics were also the most toxic. Hence, they decided to try to use something that might be less effective but was also not so deadly.

A patient who was still young and unused to pain would never be able to endure being cut open while still conscious. Dr. Liu seemed to have decided, however, that the Emperor would oblige

them. It just went to show how chronic the ruler's pain had been, and how much force of will it must have taken to make it appear as though the condition had no impact on his work.

Everything seemed to be proceeding smoothly...until a high official appeared and exclaimed, "Surgery?! Don't be absurd!"

Chapter 12: Explanation and Agreement

They didn't know where word of the surgery had leaked from.

Actually…

In Maomao's opinion, it was a miracle that the Emperor's condition had stayed hidden for so long. He'd been suppressing chronic pain and not taking proper meals, yet supposedly doing his work as if everything were normal. He even occasionally went to the rear palace to spend nights with his consorts.

It was very frustrating for the physicians, then, to face interference when the discussions had all been had and essentially all that was left was to pick up the knife.

I guess we shouldn't be surprised.

The relatives of a patient always seemed to want a say in their care. At the apothecary shop in the city, it had even happened that one regular customer's relatives had shown up to complain that the medicine was too expensive and not doing anything, to the point that they were sent away with orders to find their own treatment, then. They hadn't seen that customer since.

I sure hope they're still alive, Maomao thought.

When they were dealing with the man who stood at the apex of his country's entire political hierarchy, then, they probably should have expected that people would stick their noses in about the treatment plan.

They would never do surgery unless it were absolutely necessary. Sometimes, when someone had a grievous external injury, emergency demanded surgical treatment, but when it came to illness, treatment with drugs was the typical course.

But this isn't responding to drugs, which is why we're doing this! Maomao ground the herbs in her mortar with more vigor than usual.

"You'll just tire yourself out doing that," came the voice of a somewhat elderly woman from beside her. If one wondered why

Maomao didn't look entirely thrilled despite the fact that she had been included among the physicians, this woman's presence probably explained it. "Your old auntie has to shepherd her strength in these latter years of her life," the woman went on. "Now, just because you're young doesn't mean you should waste your energy. You'll only end up exhausted."

The woman described herself as an "auntie," and indeed, she looked like one. She was evasive about her exact age, saying only that she was somewhere in her fifties, but she had the wrinkles to match. A certain plumpness showed that she led a rich dietary life, but her fingers had dark stains that never seemed to wash away—evidence, Maomao knew, of someone who had been compounding medicines for many, many years.

People called her Auntie Liu. It was a perfectly common family name, but among the physicians it referred to one man, Dr. Liu—and Auntie Liu, as it happened, was his younger sister.

"I realize it looks like there's a lot of nepotism going on, but please don't hold it against us," Dr. Liu had said. If anything went wrong with the Emperor's treatment, all the physicians involved as well as their families would be summarily executed. In order to minimize the number of people caught in the purge, Dr. Liu had decided to hire family members of the physicians already involved. And of course, although he might talk about nepotism, Dr. Liu would never bring in mere amateurs. Auntie Liu had passed the selection examination, which implied that she knew at least as much if not more than the actual doctors here.

"Hee hee hee! This is my first time doing work outside the home, and I must say I'm nervous. Do take it easy on me, *Senior*."

Auntie Liu had spent many years in Dr. Liu's family home being involved with the practice of medicine; her medical knowledge was extensive and she was accustomed to the work.

However, she was evidently unmarried and had no children. The smudges on her fingers told the story: There were many who viewed medicine as low-class work. Maomao could only guess how many people had seen those darkened fingers and immediately decided this woman was unfit to be their bride.

In a way, Auntie Liu represented one possible life that might await Maomao.

If Maomao was annoyed, so were the other physicians.

"And here we've got everything ready!" one complained.

“His condition will only get worse if we hold off,” said another.

If Dr. Liu was right that this was appendicitis, then they were in a battle with time. If the appendix burst and sent filth throughout the Emperor’s abdomen, the chances of his demise skyrocketed.

“All right, all right, getting upset won’t solve anything. We just have to do whatever we can,” Auntie Liu said, defusing the charged atmosphere. In terms of age, she reminded Maomao of Jinshi’s elderly assistant Suiren, but she was less calculating.

She doesn’t seem like Dr. Liu at all.

Then again, maybe it was exactly because they were so different that they worked well together. And they must have worked well together, or Dr. Liu would never have called her here. She was certainly a boon to the general atmosphere; if that was why Dr. Liu had involved her, it was a brilliant stroke.

The upper physician who had been leading the surgical team had been reassigned to anesthetic needling, and Auntie Liu had effectively taken charge. The fact that no one complained was probably down to her personality.

As such, she promptly became the subject of discussion at break time.

“An auntie like her? I don’t know...”

“I hear you. I mean, we’re risking our lives too, sure, but...”

At mealtimes even the physicians, who normally spoke to each other with careful formality, could be heard to relax a bit.

Maomao was preparing tea, and, along with the auntie, was among the listeners. From what she gathered, there was more than one person raising objections to the surgery. Moreover, they were coming from both the Empress Dowager’s family and from within Gyokuen’s faction. In other words, both of the major powers at court were opposed.

“Not like I can’t understand what they’re saying,” one of the physicians said.

If the surgery were to fail, the Crown Prince would become emperor at not even five years old. In that case, the Empress’s father, Gyokuen, would likely become regent. The Empress Dowager’s people were not amused by the possibility.

By the same token, it had to be obvious to the Empress’s partisans that having such a young ruler take the throne when their own power base was not yet firmly established would open them up to a counterattack. One major factor was that Jinshi, the Emperor’s

younger brother, was just the right age for the job. Should the Emperor not survive, there would no doubt be loud voices calling for Jinshi's appointment.

There's a lot of downsides to that scenario for both of them.

They wanted the current Emperor rather than a young sovereign precisely because this was an era with no significant upheaval. If this had been a world at war, the bloodlines of the earlier era would no doubt come bubbling up, and the throne would be soaked in blood.

I guess what we have is better than that...

The question was how to explain to people that doing nothing was the surest way to make the illness worse.

Maomao sipped her tea and listened to the doctors do what amounted to griping.

That day, there were men Maomao didn't recognize at her dormitory. They rode in a magnificent carriage, and the dormitory chief was giving them a baleful look.

"What do you suppose this is about?" Maomao's junior, Changsha, asked with a mystified look. They no longer saw each other at work, but at the dorm they took turns making dinner. Today it had been Maomao's turn to buy ingredients on the way home.

It's definitely not Miss Chue.

When Chue came to summon Maomao on Jinshi-related business, she was more discreet. She would bring a less flashy carriage, or park somewhere a bit farther away.

"We'd like to ask you to come with us," one of the men said, showing her a peony crest. It was the very same one that was burned into Jinshi's flank.

Empress Gyokuyou's symbol...

Maomao studied the men's faces. It would have been reassuring to recognize at least one of them, but unfortunately there was no one she knew. Considering Maomao's singular inability to remember even those people she had actually met, maybe she couldn't complain.

If these were messengers from Empress Gyokuyou, then she had no choice but to go with them. If they were simply posing as Gyokuyou's men, however, she would prefer to refuse.

As she dithered, someone she did recognize finally emerged

from the carriage.

"Maomao," the woman said.

"Lady Hongniang," Maomao answered.

It was Empress Gyokuyou's chief lady-in-waiting.

"You will come with us, won't you?" Hongniang asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

If the chief lady-in-waiting had come in person, then Maomao definitely couldn't say no.

"Changsha," Maomao said, turning to her junior, "would you be so kind as to eat dinner by yourself tonight?"

"Of course."

Maomao gave Changsha the ingredients she'd purchased and then got into the carriage.

The carriage rolled into the Empress's pavilion. As it went, Hongniang peppered Maomao with questions.

"Do you know why we've summoned you?" she asked.

"Does it have something to do with the Emperor?" The high officials wouldn't quit jabbering about the surgery. There was no way Empress Gyokuyou didn't know about it.

"That's right. I suppose, then, you have a sense of what you're going to be asked."

Maomao thought about what a patient's family would most want to know. "I'm guessing you want to find out from me whether what the doctors have said is true."

"Exactly," Hongniang replied.

"Of course, you couldn't have asked my superiors for permission before you brought me here."

From Maomao's perspective, talking too openly about her work could lead to disciplinary measures.

"Of course. We couldn't have you coordinating your stories."

I have my own position to think of, you know...

Maomao might not like it, but here and now there was no way she could refuse. There was simply too vast a gulf between an ordinary palace lady and the Empress.

Hongniang led Maomao out of the carriage.

The leaves are red, she noted, realizing how deep into autumn they now were. She'd been so busy recently that she had hardly noticed the changes in the season.

Hongniang took her to a room with a guard standing outside.

She motioned to him, and he opened the door.

Empress Gyokuyou was within, reclining on a couch. In addition to her ladies-in-waiting, whom Maomao recognized, there was another young woman with red hair much like the Empress's. The young lady sent by Gyoku-ou, perhaps. Publicly, she was described as Gyokuyou's niece.

That's the girl Tall Senior was talking about.

Maomao was no Tall Senior, but she could tell that all the ladies in this room, the Empress not least of all, were beautiful. It wasn't just their looks—the way they did their makeup and the way they comported themselves was ineffably refined. It struck Maomao all the more because she'd spent all her time of late in workplaces full of unwashed guys.

There was one other young lady there, with braids and narrow eyes. She was plain-faced and tall, and looked to be in her mid-thirties, like Hongniang.

Is she from the west?

With her suntanned skin and slightly unusual clothing, she looked to Maomao like someone from I-sei Province.

Who's that?

Even as she pondered the question, Maomao bowed deeply.

"It's been such a long time. How are you doing?" Gyokuyou asked, and only when the Empress had spoken did Maomao raise her head.

"Yes, far too long, milady. I'm doing much the same as always."

"So I see. Have a seat."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you." Maomao sat in a chair.

Yinghua and the other two girls were looking at Maomao fondly. They gave her little waves; she wanted to wave back, but since Hongniang was there, she thought better of it.

Hongniang noticed what the girls were up to. "All right, surely you have something else to keep you busy. These two have something very important to talk about, so if you would kindly leave?"

"Awww," Yinghua said.

"Don't '*awww*' me!" snapped Hongniang.

"Yes, ma'am!" all three replied in unison.

The rapport between Hongniang and the three of them seemed alive and well. Empress Gyokuyou watched the exchange with evident amusement.

Then the three young ladies and Gyokuyou's niece left the room. The unfamiliar girl with the braids stayed. Hongniang locked the door, while the guard remained outside to make sure no one listened in.

Empress Gyokuyou was the first to speak. "I assume Hongniang has filled you in. My apologies for dispensing with the pleasantries, but could you tell me what his condition is?"

"It's the doctors' opinion that he is already beyond treatment with medicine. His symptoms suggest a high probability of appendicitis, which is when the organ called the appendix becomes inflamed. If it gets worse, the appendix could rupture, scattering the filth inside it all throughout his body. That would invite further illnesses and drastically increase the likelihood of his death. As such, they believe it's necessary to do surgery and remove the appendix before the situation gets any worse."

Maomao thought fast as she spoke, but she answered honestly—she decided that there was no way that Dr. Liu or Luomen had given the Empress a false diagnosis; they had no reason to do so.

Everyone had grown skeptical toward the doctors, even Gaoshun. From the looks on the faces of Gyokuyou and the others in the room, Maomao suspected she was right: They had heard this before.

"And removing the appendix... That involves cutting into his stomach, doesn't it?" Gyokuyou asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Will the surgery succeed?" She sounded worried. Maomao could tell she wasn't just thinking about her son's future, but was genuinely concerned for the Emperor.

The relationship between the Emperor and his Empress was not one that could be described as love or romance. Yet nonetheless, it was not as if Empress Gyokuyou felt nothing for His Majesty at all.

If only that had been anything like enough to make him better.

"The physicians are doing everything they can to make sure it will," Maomao answered.

"But it *could* fail, couldn't it?"

Maomao stopped and thought for a moment. It was hard to say what would be the best way of explaining this. Finally she said, "In his current condition, the success rate is likely better than ninety percent. However, it will decline as time goes on."

"Why?"

Maomao tried to put the matter as simply as she could. “As I said, if the appendix bursts and sends filth everywhere, it can cause other illnesses. Meaning that the longer we wait, the more this becomes a matter of life and death.”

“All right. And what other causes of failure might there be?”

“It’s possible that toxins could enter the surgical site after the procedure and cause it to become infected.”

“Toxins? You mean he might be poisoned?”

“No, ma’am. It’s like... Suppose you scraped your knee and didn’t wash it off. Toxins could enter your body through the wound and cause it to become infected. It’s the same principle. One shouldn’t touch a wound with dirty hands, for example—but patients often inadvertently touch the surgical site and introduce toxins that way.”

Maomao was as honest about the possible failures as she was about everything else. Trying to hide anything would only make her seem suspicious.

“One last question, then,” said Gyokuyou. “If the physicians are wrong and it isn’t appendicitis, what will you do then?”

“We’ll just have to cross that bridge when we come to it. However, I don’t think it would mean that the surgery was in vain.”

If they could physically see where the illness was, that would be worth a lot. Moreover, if they could even just remove the filth from his belly, it would almost certainly contribute to the lessening of his symptoms. They might or might not be able to treat the fundamental problem then and there, but it would be better than waiting around.

Empress Gyokuyou, Hongniang, and the woman with the braids looked at each other.

“Did I say anything that contradicted the other medical staff?” Maomao asked.

“No,” Gyokuyou responded, a troubled smile on her face. “I don’t suppose you’ve all agreed on a story, have you?”

“If we had, I might be better able to dissemble about the rate of failure for the surgery.”

“True enough.” Gyokuyou sighed and looked at the braided girl. “You heard her. Would you be so kind as to explain to Father, Honored Elder Sister?”

Elder sister...

So she finally knew who the woman with braids was—one of

Gyokuyou's many half-siblings.

"I will," the woman replied. "However, I take no responsibility for how those around him may receive this."

"Meaning you think Father will understand."

The other woman nodded silently. It was obvious from the conversation how intelligent she was.

"Sigh... I'm sorry to have called you so suddenly, Maomao," said Gyokuyou.

"Not at all, ma'am," Maomao replied, relieved to find that she hadn't offered anything mistaken.

"You haven't had dinner yet, have you? Since you're here, why not eat before you go?"

Maomao reflexively put a hand to her tummy.

I want to! Oh, how I want to...

But if she ate here, her careful, correct explanation would be in vain.

The meal might look like a bribe.

Maomao bit her lip hard and bowed her head. "I'm terribly sorry, milady. In fact, I've had my meal already."

Then she left the room, trying to keep her stomach from growling.

Chapter 13: Sowing Seeds

Jinshi was getting a headache from having this conversation for the umpteenth time.

"But what's to be done should anything happen to His Majesty's honored personage?" asked the officials. It sounded like a question, but they were really looking for confirmation.

Exactly what answer they wanted from Jinshi depended on their position. Some sought to set Jinshi up as crown prince; others didn't. Some were trying to judge which camp they should join.

Now it was lunchtime, and things were finally quiet. The flow of people and paperwork had stopped.

"You've got to *do* something about this!"

"I'm afraid I can't, sir."

The voice came from behind a dividing screen. As ever, Baryou was avoiding everyone else as he did his work. The officials who came calling would never have suspected he was behind that curtain. Thanks to which, he at least could continue working away no matter who showed up.

"This is making *me* want to hide," said Basen, looking just as bothered as Jinshi. He attended Jinshi as his aide and bodyguard, but diplomacy was not his strong suit. Jinshi was just happy he hadn't punched anybody yet.

Jinshi noticed that the number of officials who asked him prying questions decreased drastically if Basen was glaring at them. It suggested they took Jinshi himself rather lightly. Was it because of all those years he'd spent pretending to be a eunuch? Or did he need to put on a more forceful front?

"Perhaps I need a few more of these," Jinshi said, scratching the scar on his cheek with a finger. Some more scars might help turn his jewellike visage into something more intimidating.

"You're not thinking about doing anything you shouldn't, are you?" someone asked.

Jinshi put an end to his ruminations by looking at the source of the voice. It was Maamei, who was preparing lunch. He had all

three Ma siblings in one place today.

On the table in front of him, Maamei placed his lunch, something that was quick to eat. Jinshi had sometimes gone without lunch, but there was no winning against this older-sister-like lady-in-waiting. No matter how busy he was, she would make sure he got a meal.

He took a bite of some cubed meat tucked into some bread. It wasn't a very refined way of eating, but only his milk siblings were here, and he knew they wouldn't hold it against him. Most importantly, Maamei had encouraged him to relax a little, at least at mealtimes. And her younger brothers were not about to go against what their older sister said.

"If you might hear me out, then? I don't mind if you keep eating."

Jinshi nodded wordlessly. Maamei was a woman—and for that reason, there were certain jobs he could only entrust to her.

"There are currently three vacancies among His Majesty's four most favored consorts. But two of them appear likely to be filled soon."

At the moment, there was only one upper consort, the Wise Consort Lihua.

Baryou and Basen were men, making it difficult for them to get a good sense of exactly what was going on in the rear palace. Instead, Jinshi sometimes tasked Maamei with reporting to him on the situation there.

Jinshi had once overseen the rear palace, even if only for a few years. It had been more than two years since he had left that position, but he still knew more about what happened there than any number of less qualified officials.

"As you said, Moon Prince, the positions of Precious Consort and Virtuous Consort are going to be filled by young ladies from the Empress Dowager's faction and the Empress's faction, respectively."

The position of Precious Consort had once belonged to Empress Gyokuyou, while that of Virtuous Consort had formerly been held by Lishu of the U clan.

As for the position of Pure Consort, it practically seemed cursed: It had been held by a young woman whose clan had attempted rebellion.

Jinshi looked at a piece of paper that Maamei held out for him. His brow furrowed—there was a name on this list that he had not

been expecting.

"I grant that if we had the same...materials as we did two years ago, there would be some inadequacies in the selection. Which name concerns you, sir?" Maamei asked.

Jinshi washed down the bread with some tea. Without missing a beat, Maamei handed him a handkerchief, so he wiped his hands and took the paper.

"The candidate from the Empress Dowager's faction," he replied. "She's seventeen years old, and only entered the rear palace last year." She was the grandniece of the Empress Dowager's half-brother, Hao—and hence also the great-niece of the Empress Dowager herself. "I was of the belief that Hao had only an older sister and a younger sister by way of siblings."

"That's correct, sir. This girl is the granddaughter of the Empress Dowager's older sister."

"The Empress Dowager's older sister..."

Jinshi brought up his mental family tree. He recalled that the older sister of Empress Dowager Anshi had entered service as a middle consort, but that it was her younger half-sibling, Anshi, serving as her lady-in-waiting, who had attracted the former emperor's attention.

The former emperor's reprehensible behavior bore a certain resemblance to something that had led to the rebellion of the Shi clan. That episode had been in some ways a revenge drama staged by Shenmei, whom the former emperor had spurned.

The main difference was that after they learned of Anshi's pregnancy, her family had swiftly sent her older sister out of the rear palace.

"No, no, no, no," said Jinshi.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes," replied Maamei. "There's no one better."

"This person is just *asking* for trouble."

"Yes. Which is why we don't make her the Pure Consort, but the Precious one." Maamei had that look on her face like a predator's. The former Pure Consort, Loulan, had been a daughter of the Shi clan and one of the masterminds of the rebellion.

"Couldn't you come up with anyone else?"

"I'm afraid *Master* Hao had no direct relations who could be admitted. Several of his more distant relations are in the rear palace, but his honored elder sister seems bent on restoring her honor."

“Oh, geez,” chorused not Jinshi, but Baryou and Basen.

From the Emperor’s perspective, Hao’s great-niece would be his cousin’s daughter. In order to prevent illnesses arising from marriage to close family members, all other things being equal, consorts would be chosen from the most distant bloodline possible. That was why Lihua, who was a relative of the Imperial family, had been made Wise Consort: Although the four great ladies were all upper consorts, the Wise Consort ranked last among them.

Jinshi doubted Hao realized such factors played a part in the selection of these women.

“She was persistent enough that even His Majesty was obliged to spend one night with her,” Maamei said.

Jinshi narrowed his eyes and took a big bite of bread.

This subject always made him feel awkward, despite the fact that during his time as a “eunuch,” he’d been in charge of preparing for these encounters. Basen looked down, a little embarrassed—he didn’t know much about the rear palace, but he seemed to sense Jinshi’s discomfort.

This was a world where the map of power could shift depending on how many times the Emperor had gone into the chambers of a woman from one faction or another.

“A young lady from the Empress’s faction was admitted to the rear palace at the same time and made a middle consort,” Maamei said.

That, Jinshi already knew. He’d been contemplating what to do about exactly that. Since Gyoku-ou’s adopted daughter had ultimately wound up as one of Empress Gyokuyou’s serving women, someone from their bloodline had to be admitted to the rear palace or it would have left a bad taste in their mouth. So instead, they had chosen to admit the child of one of Gyoku-ou’s other siblings. They decided the daughter of Dahai, Gyokuen’s third son, was a particularly good choice.

The girl had not been consulted about whether she wanted this. It would be impossible to conduct politics if they had to worry about how she felt—but at the same time, Jinshi was aware that they were doing something terribly cruel. At times it tormented him, the thought of how awful a person he could be.

“His Majesty has visited her chamber as well,” Maamei reported.

The Emperor, Jinshi thought, was a very cunning man. He was

thinking about what his ill health might later cause. He was thinking, Jinshi suspected, about how to make a soft landing for himself and his country if all should not go well.

"Was that not the same basis on which you yourself recommended high consorts, Moon Prince?"

Jinshi swallowed his food, hard. "Yes. Of course. I simply thought... Well, he's leaving nothing to chance, sowing his seeds like this."

"Sowing his seeds" had two meanings.

A middle consort visited by the Emperor would be promoted to upper consort. Those outside the rear palace would most likely suspect her of being pregnant.

Jinshi wasn't so sure about the Empress's faction, but at least Hao, the head of the Empress Dowager's faction, was a relatively easy man to manipulate. They just needed him to jump to the conclusion that the girl was with child. With more game pieces among his relatives, his thinking would naturally change.

"I've already sent maids to each of the ladies," Maamei said. Jinshi could only marvel at her thoroughness.

"Will they be able to fan the flames as necessary?"

"It's not a matter of whether they'll be able to. They'll do it." Maamei seemed uncommonly invested in the matter.

"We don't know whether the child will be a boy or girl. For that matter, we don't even know if she'll really get pregnant," Jinshi said.

"There are those who believe that the sex of the child is determined by the condition of the mother's womb. And I have it on good authority that at a drinking party, Hao claimed that the reason he has only sons and grandsons is because the pregnant women in his family eat only sour foods."

"Could that possibly be true?" Jinshi asked. He would have to check with Maomao next time he saw her.

But whatever—if that was enough to get Hao to change his thinking, then wonderful.

"I have a handful of other strategies in mind," Maamei said.

"Good, good."

It was better than sitting and doing nothing.

Nothing was what Jinshi could do about His Majesty's illness. The only thing within his power was to make sure the environment was as conducive as possible to treatment and healing.

Chapter 14: The Patient's Consent

Thanks to the physicians' explanations and a few understanding folks, a date for the surgery was finally set. There were still some who weren't happy about the situation, but they could be cajoled into going along somehow.

"All right, preparations are ready. Let's do everything we can!"

The physicians, who had spent so long living with the uncertainty of whether the surgery would take place or not, clenched their fists. Then again, it also looked a bit as if they were trying to psych themselves up and banish the thought that if they failed, they would be executed.

Maomao, too, checked to make sure all her preparations were well and truly complete.

One person, though, looked totally relaxed as he examined his tools. Who? Tianyu.

"Hmm hm hmmm!"

He even had the mental space to be humming! The surgical and postsurgical teams were prepping in the same room, so there was no way Maomao could avoid seeing him.

"What's a guy like *him* doing here?" Maomao muttered.

"Now, don't talk about him that way," Auntie Liu chided her. "Isn't he quite good at what he does?"

"Yes...but his ethics leave something to be desired."

"True, true," she said with unexpected sobriety. Being Dr. Liu's younger sister, Auntie Liu had probably known Tianyu for quite a long time. "It can be trouble if someone is skilled but too whimsical."

"Yes, ma'am."

"One thing's for sure, though—he doesn't let anything get him down."

"That is certainly true."

If anything, the more difficult the situation, the brighter Tianyu's eyes seemed to sparkle, as if he enjoyed it. He could keep his cool in any situation, albeit in a different sense from Lahan's

Brother.

"Let's just focus on the postsurgical care," Auntie Liu said.

"Yes, ma'am."

Maomao was preparing clean bandages. She also had antiseptic medicines and salves, as well as concoctions to stop itching, as the surgical site was likely to itch as it healed. They couldn't have the Emperor inadvertently touching the site and getting it infected.

Their group had also been entrusted with directing the Emperor's diet based on his postsurgical progress, so Maomao and Auntie Liu were coordinating with someone who was in charge of food.

Now there's no way we can fail, Maomao thought, clenching her fist.

It was then that she heard an unmistakable set of footsteps. "Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao!"

"What is it, Miss Chue? And, uh, should you be in here?"

It was Chue, appearing for the first time in quite a while at Maomao's workplace.

"No worries—Miss Chue got special permission. Besides, what would I ever *do* without my chief physician Maomao looking after me?" She offered Maomao her limp, motionless right arm.

She's right—I haven't checked on her progress in a while.

Maomao gamely took Chue's hand and started checking the movement of the fingers. She accompanied this with some gentle massage.

"Mmm! Your massage is so effective, Miss Maomao. But my arm is doing all right just now, so maybe you could come with me?"

Was she acting as Jinshi's messenger again? Maomao cocked her head and decided it would be best to talk to Auntie Liu. It wasn't that the old lady was officially in charge of anything; it just sort of seemed like the right thing to do.

"I'm not sure this looks like a time I can just slip away for a few minutes. What do you think?" Maomao asked her.

"We'd have to ask my brother..." Auntie Liu looked around to see if Dr. Liu was there.

"Oh, no worries—I have Dr. Liu's permission too. In fact, he called me here," Chue drawled.

"I suppose that's no problem then, but be sure to let the other youngsters know on your way out."

"Yes, ma'am."

Maomao followed Chue, who took her to a conference room a short distance from the medical office. Several people were already there: Dr. Liu, Luomen, Jinshi, and Gaoshun. They turned when Maomao came in; all of them looked grave.

Maomao bowed her head politely and waited until Jinshi said, "All right. Raise your head." Since Dr. Liu was there, she was particularly careful.

Maomao was seized by the desire to get right back out of there, but Chue was behind her. She had known from the moment she'd been summoned, of course, that there would be no escape.

"May I ask you to confirm why I was called here?" she said.

"His Majesty has shown a disinclination toward tomorrow's surgery," Jinshi replied.

Maomao stood for a moment, her mouth agape. Then she said, "Whoa, whoa, whoa!"

"Don't 'Whoa, whoa, whoa!' me," Jinshi answered, lips pursed.

"But— But—"

"Maomao," Luomen said, gently but firmly. Maomao slowly put a hand over her mouth.

"Yes, we all took it that he was of a mind to have this procedure," said Dr. Liu. "But if His Majesty says no—"

"Then there will be no surgery," Jinshi said, finishing the thought. Gaoshun nodded, the furrow in his brow even deeper than usual. Luomen just sat there looking very distressed.

"And this when we had finally gained the understanding and agreement of the Gyoku clan—Empress Gyokuyou and Sir Gyokuen." Dr. Liu looked at Maomao. Word had obviously reached him of her summons by and subsequent explanation to the Empress. "Even Sir Hao, although still not fully convinced, was less opposed than he had been. This was to be our chance."

Who or what is Hao? Maomao wondered. She assumed he was some important person she didn't know, which meant there was scant reason to remember his name. Hence, she ignored it.

It was always ultimately the patient who was least happy to have surgery. When that patient was someone so significant, however, that fact became a serious problem.

In Maomao's mind, this left a question of why they hadn't gotten the Emperor's explicit agreement before this. Had everyone simply been working on the assumption that if it would make him better, he would happily undergo the procedure?

No matter how good the chances of success, it doesn't change the fact that we'll be cutting open his stomach.

She understood now why Gaoshun was there. But what was *she* doing in this company?

"I don't think this is a subject I can do anything about," she said.

"Wait until I'm done talking," Dr. Liu said.

"Yes, sir," Maomao answered, covering her mouth again.

"His Majesty wishes to host a function before the surgery," Dr. Liu said grimly.

Alcohol right before surgery? Give me a break!

He was in no shape to drink, so he was probably thinking of tea, but Maomao couldn't help imagining a lavish banquet.

"Mistress Ah-Duo and I have been summoned to attend," Jinshi said, and Maomao swallowed hard.

The Emperor, Ah-Duo, and Jinshi—just the three of them, parents and child, even if that fact had never been officially acknowledged. And even if Jinshi himself didn't know it.

Yep. I've got a very bad feeling about this.

Maomao didn't know what to do.

"Mistress Ah-Duo has indicated that she will attend if you are present, Maomao," Jinshi said.

Maomao didn't respond immediately, but she squeezed her eyes shut, gritted her teeth, tilted her head back, and groaned.

I want to say no! Ugh, I don't want to go!

But saying no was one thing she couldn't do.

What did the Emperor have it in mind to talk about? Was he thinking of trying to put his personal affairs in order in hopes of shoring up his feelings of vulnerability prior to surgery?

If that process included revealing the secret of Jinshi's birth, Jinshi might end up with an ulcer of his own. The last thing they needed was for father and son to *both* end up with inflamed innards.

Maomao made a mental note to bring stomach medicine to the meeting.

"Just what kind of connections did you forge with Lady Ah-Duo during your time serving in the rear palace?" Dr. Liu asked, looking at Maomao with a mixture of amazement and dismay.

"Lady Ah-Duo described Miss Maomao as sort of a drinking buddy!" Chue piped up.

I guess it would be untrue to say we never *drank together...*

Was she referring to their meeting atop the rear-palace wall? If Ah-Duo had wine and not tea in mind, that was the only occasion Maomao could think of. It would have been awful trouble to actually explain, however, so she kept quiet.

“That’s the situation. You’ll join us?” Jinshi asked.

“Yes, sir,” Maomao said with another bow of her head. It was the only answer she could give.

Chapter 15: Confession—The Surface

Maomao got déjà vu when she saw where Chue was taking her, and it was very unpleasant.

This is—

—a place Maomao would find hard to forget.

A place of nightmares!

It was a private area for the use of the Imperial family, where Maomao had found herself with the Emperor, Jinshi, and Empress Gyokuyou—the very place where Jinshi had burned a brand into his own side.

The unpleasant premonitions got stronger.

Empress Gyokuyou wasn't there this time; instead, Ah-Duo was present. Maomao sure hoped this encounter wouldn't end with another secret that she would have to take to her grave.

"Okay, gotta check you over!" Chue said, patting Maomao down before she was allowed to enter the hall. She had to make sure Maomao wasn't trying to smuggle any weapons into the Imperial family's presence.

"Goodness, Miss Maomao, you do keep the most eclectic *stuff* tucked away wherever you can fit it! You're like a squirrel," Chue said as she observed the growing pile of herbs, sewing implements, bandages, and more.

"I could say the very same thing about you, Miss Chue," Maomao replied. She never knew what Chue was going to come up with next. Even Maomao didn't produce doves from her robes.

"There's a lot of stuff here that I think you could have assumed you could leave behind. What do you do with it all?"

"It's just, I don't feel right if I don't have a certain heft. Don't you ever feel that way?"

"Wellll, I suppose I know what you're talking about."

Maomao had gone from the medical office back to the dormitory so she could take a bath and change her clothes. She would soon be meeting the Emperor, He of the Inimitable Facial Hair, for the first time in quite a while, and she was trying not to be

rude. But still...

Ugh! I don't wanna gooooo!

It was all she could think.

She wished she could be allowed to do some griping at least to Chue.

"And what's this?" Chue drawled, producing a cloth-wrapped package from among the goods she was inspecting.

"Stomach medication," Maomao replied.

"Hoh, hoh, stomach medication," Chue repeated. She tried the medicine on her tongue, made a sour face, and handed it back to Maomao. "*This*, you can keep."

"Thank you. It was the one thing I didn't want to have to go without, so I appreciate it."

Maomao's steps were heavy, which Chue tried to remedy by giving her a push from behind.

"Are you going to join us, Miss Chue?" Maomao asked.

"Sadly not! Miss Chue is on guard duty!"

Chue's very presence was enough to make any situation slightly less oppressive, but that thin ray of hope was now lost.

"What about Master Gaoshun?"

"My father-in-law? Not sure. Probably on guard too. But don't you worry! I'm a good wife who brings her father-in-law's favorite snacks so that we won't get bored no matter how long your chat goes on!"

Chue showed Maomao a bamboo steamer she produced from who-knew-where. Even if she could have kept it hidden, it seemed like the steam would have made things awfully warm.

There were no windows in this long hallway, but it wasn't dark either. Flames flickered at their feet, providing illumination. Gaoshun stood at the far end of the hallway along with another guard.

Have I seen him somewhere before?

At the sound of Chue's distinctive footsteps, the guard stepped forward.

"Older Brother-in-Law! Would you like some snacks?" Chue asked.

When she heard "older brother-in-law," Maomao clapped her hands. It was Maamei's husband, Ba-something-or-other.

"No, thank you," he said.

"Have a drink of wine?" Chue drawled.

“I’m not much of a drinker.”

“Maybe juice, then?”

“Where on earth would you get it?”

Ba-something-or-other had the very same question as Maomao. It looked like it was safe to presume he shared the Ma clan’s sense of what was, well, common sense.

“Chue, we’re on duty,” Gaoshun said.

“Duty we may be on, but it’s important to keep your energy up! Don’t you worry—Chue will take a bite first so you can see there’s nothing wrong with it!”

Clearly exasperated, Gaoshun turned to Maomao. “Xiaomao. Don’t mind her.”

“Yes, sir.”

At Gaoshun’s invitation, Maomao entered the room.

The furnishings look even more elaborate than usual.

Last time, there had been a bunch of herbs there, but not this time. Maomao was conflicted: Was that disappointing, or reassuring?

As she entered the room, she found herself walking on a carpet that looked like it had probably taken a year to weave three centimeters of. The Emperor and Ah-Duo sat on a couch on the far side of the room.

Here we go...

She had, unfortunately, arrived after His Majesty. It was what it was, but it made her uncomfortable.

It was not the Emperor but Ah-Duo who spoke to her. “I’m sorry for summoning you here.”

“Not at all, ma’am. I must apologize for my tardiness.”

“No Yue yet? Isn’t he with you?”

“No, ma’am.”

Jinshi’s absence was perhaps her one saving grace here.

Ah-Duo motioned Maomao to sit, so she picked a small stool and sat down. There was another chair, one with a backrest, which she assumed was for Jinshi. It was quite helpful, actually: The difference in the chairs made it obvious where Maomao should sit.

There was one couch and two individual chairs. The Emperor and Ah-Duo occupied opposite ends of the couch. It was not flirtatious, nor was it a sign of alienation from each other. It showed they kept the perfect distance.

Right in the middle of the chairs was a round table with two

bottles on it. From what Maomao could see of what was in the glass cups that accompanied them, one bottle contained grape juice, the other plain water. There were four cups in total, and two of them were empty. That fact, and the similar number of places to sit, made it clear that only four people were going to take part in what was to follow.

Maomao let her gaze drift to the Emperor. His facial hair was as imposing as ever, and his pallor seemed decent enough.

No, wait...

It was only being made to *look* decent. She could see traces of brushstrokes on his skin; they'd used whitening powder that matched his skin tone.

You probably wouldn't spot it from a distance.

Evidently, they were making every effort to ensure that his advisors wouldn't notice that there was something wrong. She suspected it was Gaoshun doing most of the work.

She was still observing His Majesty when they heard footsteps.

"I apologize for being late," Jinshi said, entering with his hands clasped and his head bowed. Ever since he had given up his eunuch persona, there was only one person to whom he bowed the head.

"Have a seat," said the Emperor. In essence, Jinshi was the Emperor's guest, and Maomao was Ah-Duo's. That would explain why Ah-Duo had been the one to greet her.

"We have no alcohol or anything to eat with it. There's juice and there's plain water. Which would you like?" Ah-Duo picked up the two bottles. Maomao made to pour for her, but she shooed her away; tonight, Maomao was a guest.

"Juice," said Jinshi.

"Water, if you'd be so kind," answered Maomao. She dearly would have liked to get a bit drunk right at that moment, but if there was no alcohol then that option was off the table. She would go with the plain water.

Once their glasses were filled, the Emperor cut to the chase. "Let me explain why you've been summoned here."

"Yes, sir," Jinshi answered. He was the only one to speak; Ah-Duo and Maomao remained silent.

Ah-Duo already knew, Maomao suspected. For her part, Maomao wouldn't—couldn't—speak until she was given permission.

"I suppose by now the physicians have told you that I'm cool toward the idea of tomorrow's surgery."

"Yes, sir."

"Just to be clear, I'm not being stubborn. I simply told them that I wanted to attempt the surgery only after I had done what I have to do."

This meeting, she took it, was what he had to do.

"They say the surgery has an excellent chance of success. Is that

not so, O Lakan's daughter?"

"Yes," Maomao said slowly—she wasn't thrilled with being referred to that way, but she answered. "We think it may be better than ninety percent."

"And what if we were to simply allow the current situation to continue without surgery?"

Not happening.

Maomao straightened up. "If your pain were better than it has been, there might not be a problem. But the physicians appear to have judged that that's not the case."

She couldn't ask the Emperor for his subjective opinion—if His Majesty said it didn't hurt, she would be obliged to believe him.

"What will happen if the condition gets worse?" the Emperor asked.

Maomao tried to answer as precisely as she could. "If it's appendicitis, meaning an organ near the cecum is inflamed, then a body part called the appendix can get infected and burst. The filth can be scattered all through your abdomen, causing other diseases, which generally leads to death—at least that's what our cases so far have shown."

"Very well."

The Emperor proceeded to pepper her with questions: What if it wasn't appendicitis? How would they treat it? Was surgery absolutely necessary?

Maomao answered all the questions just as she had for Empress Gyokuyou. She was helping the Emperor and Jinshi to reaffirm what they knew, and Ah-Duo, perhaps, to hear for the first time.

Ah-Duo is clearly being treated as not part of the inner circle on this.

She seemed to know the general situation, but not to have been told the details. The fact that she was sitting here anyway left Maomao unable to shake her anxiety.

"Mm. It would appear they've taught you your job very well," the Emperor said.

Maomao had presumably told him exactly the same thing as the doctors. She was relieved: If she hadn't been able to explain the situation, he might have decided that the palace ladies were nothing more than pretty accessories in the medical office.

No, wait. I can't go feeling relieved here.

The really important question now was: What was the Emperor

thinking?

"As you can see, the very serious, very honest, very stubborn doctors refused to tell me unequivocally that this will help. I don't doubt that they'll do their best, of course, but I think we should be considering every possibility."

"Please don't speak of such ill-starred things, sir," Jinshi said.

"Ill-starred? Mm, perhaps. But Zui, how many times in these past years do you think my advisors have come to me complaining that you were simply using your little prophecy of an insect plague to raise taxes?"

"That plague did in fact occur, did it not, sir?" Jinshi asked, looking put out. Zui must be his given name—the true name of an Imperial family member, which those below were not ordinarily privileged to hear.

"So it did. Which is why it shouldn't surprise you that I, too, wish to think of what *could* happen."

He's got him there.

The Emperor looked thoroughly pleased with himself, but he was clutching his abdomen. Maomao realized he was trying to get through the pain.

"I want to leave a written record of what should be done if the worst should happen to me," he said.

What, doesn't he have a will?

Maomao came dangerously close to letting the words out of her mouth; she clamped her jaw shut in the nick of time.

"For that reason, Zui, I wish to get your opinion."

"My opinion on what, sir?"

"Do you wish to succeed me, Zui?"

If Maomao had had something to eat or drink at that moment, she would have spit it out. Sadly, there was no food there, and she hadn't touched her water.

Jinshi's expression didn't shift. "You have the Crown Prince, sir."

"A child not even five years old. It will be years before he can be involved in politics."

"You have Sir Gyokuen."

"Gyokuen is an old man."

"And your other family members?"

Jinshi deftly parried each objection. Maomao had been starting to think she could forget about the stomach medicine she'd brought,

but from the twitch in Jinshi's cheek, she realized she would need it after all.

"Do you not think the Crown Prince would become a puppet for my maternal relatives?" the Emperor asked.

"I couldn't say. I suspect, however, that it might bring some favor to the west."

It was plausible: Gyokuen had roots in I-sei Province. If the Gyoku clan were to gain power, trade with the west might come to be seen as a higher priority.

"The Crown Prince is still young. He might yet succumb to illness," the Emperor said. He certainly didn't hesitate to say things others might take to be unlucky.

Please don't talk about this, Maomao thought. Now *her* stomach was starting to hurt.

"There's Consort Lihua's child," Jinshi suggested. "In terms of pure accomplishments, there's no one more suited to be the mother of the nation than Consort Lihua."

Maomao shared Jinshi's estimation of Lihua. She might be more likely to pay heed to the whole country rather than just the west, as Empress Gyokuyou might.

"Yoh, please. Don't exercise Yue so."

It was Ah-Duo who called the Emperor "Yoh." Granted, it was just the four of them there, but still—Yoh? Was that something to call the sovereign of the entire nation? Maomao felt goosebumps rise on her skin. If there had been anybody else listening, the name would certainly have been interpreted as a mark of profound disrespect. Even "Yue" alone should have been a source of hesitation.

"You should come out and say it. You wish that little prince were alive. Say what you really think—that it's my fault he's dead," Ah-Duo said.

Forget goosebumps; Maomao thought she was about to grow feathers.

All she could do was let a thousand-yard stare take over her eyes. *I just want to go home and eat dinner. Too much trouble to make it myself, though. I want to eat one of En'en's meals.*

"No one is saying that," the Emperor replied, but his beard was quivering.

"And yet, if I'd done everything right, there wouldn't have been a problem, would there?" Ah-Duo sounded uncharacteristically self-

critical. It didn't sound right coming from her; she was usually brimming with confidence and bravado.

To Maomao, it sounded as if she were saying: *If only I hadn't switched those children.*

I guess His Majesty must know about that.

Maomao knew too. The only one who didn't was the man himself—Jinshi.

"The child would have grown, become a man, and no doubt a fine one at that. Not one who would have banished a brilliant doctor just to lash out. Think how many children have died who might have lived full lives if that doctor had been there to help."

That was true enough, Maomao thought. If they hadn't exchanged Jinshi and the true younger brother of the Emperor, a brilliant doctor—that is to say, Luomen—might never have been banished from the palace.

But by the same token Jinshi, who sat before her now, might well have been long dead.

"If there's a problem, it's my personal status," Ah-Duo went on. "I did it—I did it all!"

"...ence," said the Emperor.

"What's that? I can't hear you!"

"I said, silence!" the Emperor bellowed, so loudly that Maomao thought her eardrums might burst, as he rose from his seat. The great man hardly ever looked less than sanguine, but now his face was drawn and he was sweating profusely.

I'm going to need more than stomach medicine!

There was a knock at the door—it was Gaoshun and Chue outside. His Majesty had really shouted.

The Emperor sat back down, still sweating. He composed himself and then looked at Maomao. "Tell them it's nothing," he commanded.

"Yes, sir."

She went over and opened the door.

"We heard His Majesty's voice. Is anything the matter?" Gaoshun asked, worried. He was there along with Ba-something-or-other, Chue, and even Basen, who must have accompanied Jinshi as his bodyguard.

"I was told to tell you that it's nothing," Maomao replied.

"I don't believe that for a second!" Basen exclaimed, but Gaoshun silenced him with a jerk of his chin.

“Understood,” Gaoshun said, not pursuing the matter. “If there *should* be any trouble, don’t hesitate to call for help.”

“Yes, sir.”

Maomao closed the door and returned to her stool. The atmosphere had not grown any less tense in the meantime.

Things are even more charged after that outburst.

She hoped fervently that the Emperor wouldn’t cause his appendix to explode right then and there.

“Ah-Duo. You be quiet for a moment,” the Emperor said. Ah-Duo looked displeased, but she didn’t say anything more. Instead His Majesty continued, “Zui, why do you refuse the Imperial title? You could stand at the apex of our very nation!” This time he sounded cajoling.

Jinshi didn’t quite seem to know where to look. “Is the apex of the nation such a fine place?” he asked.

“It is all that I know.”

That much was true, Maomao thought.

“There is none other here, except I. And if there had been anyone, they would have been wiped out. For my grandmother was the empress regnant.”

He called his own grandmother the empress regnant. His Majesty had spent all this time as the only child of the former emperor. His father’s preference for young girls meant further progeny had been unlikely to be forthcoming. He must have been raised with the utmost care.

He’d had one path in life, and one only: to become the Emperor.

“Zui. You’ve known and enjoyed a far wider world than I ever have—for I cherished you. Nonetheless, I have not gone easy on you. Surely you would be able to fill my place if you succeeded me, don’t you think?”

“What would become of Empress Gyokuyou and the Crown Prince?” Jinshi asked.

“The Crown Prince is still young.”

“Surely a regent could be set up? If I should vie for the throne at this moment, it would only cause chaos.”

Maomao agreed wholeheartedly. They were going around in circles. Neither side would give because there were things preventing them from doing so.

It doesn’t make sense.

The Emperor was asking Jinshi to succeed him on the throne when he had long ago established a different child as crown prince. Of course, he might be doing it simply to tidy up the power structure within the court, publicly prioritizing his own son.

Anyway, if they were really here to formalize the Emperor's will, then Ah-Duo's presence was puzzling. It would make more sense for Empress Gyokuyou to be there, but for *this* will, she absolutely could not be involved.

"Most of all, I'm not clever enough to balance several women at the same time. One is enough for me," Jinshi said.

Maomao's mind all but went blank.

"This when you were my testing stone in the rear palace?"

"I wish you would stop calling me that!" Jinshi said, his voice growing sharp. The frantic note seemed to be not anger, but embarrassment.

Balancing several women, eh?

He'd shot arrows through the hearts of so many ladies and consorts in the rear palace, but dig down just a layer and one discovered that this man was as socially maladroit as they came. So much so, in fact, that it caused him to make sure he was ready for anything. Maomao didn't know what to do with him.

What could the Emperor be thinking, though? Surely he hadn't forgotten what Jinshi had done in this very room? Maomao hadn't looked for a while, but she was fairly confident the peony brand must still be there on his flank.

And indeed, it turned out that that, too, was accounted for.

"If you say you can love only one woman, then you need simply hem that person in. Choose one of the many lovely flowers in the rear palace and lavish your affection on her."

"Do you not care if I don't produce children?"

"If you can't, so be it. That way, even if you do take the throne, the Crown Prince can remain the Crown Prince."

Please don't do that.

The Emperor was saying that Jinshi didn't have to visit any other consorts. But Jinshi said firmly, "No, I'm afraid that won't do."

"Why not? You want your own son to be emperor after all?"

"No, sir." Jinshi's eyelashes lowered. "To love one consort only would be to make enemies of all the rest."

"You need only give her your protection."

“Enough resentment can penetrate even the greatest protection.” Jinshi clenched his fist. He had been in the rear palace long enough to know very well that however beautiful and intelligent the Emperor’s women were, they could be hideous indeed. “Even if it doesn’t lead to physical violence, it could still wound her heart.”

“What will you do, then? With this one woman of yours?”

“A fair question. I’m sure I could never make her my consort.” He looked slowly at Maomao. “Her form is unique, and I would be putting her in a place where she would be pounded from every side. It might change her shape.”

“It might not,” the Emperor rejoined.

“She might make me *think* it had not. I don’t think I could do it.” Jinshi smiled. It was a hollow look, but his fists were clenched in resolution. “If I must cage this unique thing, then much better to let it be free.”

He was clenching his fists so hard Maomao could see blue veins popping up.

“Can you do that?”

The Emperor was asking what he would do about the brand on his flank.

Jinshi smiled, more brightly, and brushed his side. “If I did, I suppose I would have to cut this off, or burn it away entirely.”

Maomao jumped up in spite of herself and glared at him.

I said never to do that again!

He gave her an apologetic look, a vulnerable expression that said: *Do forgive me.* Maomao, her breath hot in her nostrils, swore that she wouldn’t treat him even if he scorched himself again, but she sat back down.

“I see you’re quite a romantic. Isn’t that so, Ah-Duo?”

The Emperor looked at Ah-Duo, who had stayed silent just as she had been bidden. Now she sat with her mouth hanging open, looking stunned. A single tear rolled down her cheek.

“Ah-Duo?”

“Er—mm. Yes. Yes, you’re right.” She shook her head as if to fling away the tear.

“Ah-Duo?” The Emperor looked outright perplexed.

“What? May I speak again?” Her spunk was back. Maomao might have thought she’d imagined the look and the tear, if it weren’t for the small dark spot where it had landed on the couch.

Ah-Duo placed her hand over the spot as if to hide it. Then she asked, “So then, what do you want to do, Yue?”

“I want to be His Majesty’s subject. And when a change of rulership comes, I wish to be the Crown Prince’s subject as well.”

“Even if the Crown Prince leaves you to handle the weight of the throne or the bustling garden we call the rear palace?”

It was a loaded question, Maomao thought.

“A ruler’s subjects are there to help lighten that weight. Beyond that, I can only hope that the Crown Prince will prove to be skilled in the handling of flowers.” Jinshi sounded almost shy. He’d noticed Ah-Duo’s tear.

“You heard him.”

The Emperor didn’t say anything; he looked steadily at Ah-Duo, not at Jinshi. His gaze moved from her eyes, to her nose, her lips, and finally her hand, as if tracing the path of the tear she had shed.

Chapter 16: Confession—The Secret

She'd screwed it all up, thought Ah-Duo.

She looked at the faces of the other three—she was sure they'd noticed, but they were pretending they hadn't; that was helpful of them. She wished it hadn't happened. She would will it away.

She considered why Yoh had summoned Yue like this immediately before his surgery, and why he had called her, who to all appearances had nothing to do with the matter.

Yoh, in her opinion, had no intention of letting Yue go. Was that because of that silly promise he'd made to her so long ago, or because, in order for him to be "Heaven," he wanted Yue to succeed to the same? Whichever, it had caused him to bring Ah-Duo to this making of his "will."

Normally a woman like her, not even a consort, would have no place at a gathering like this. He ought to have brought his Empress, Gyokuyou.

There was a simple way for him to ensnare Yue: All the Emperor had to do was publicly name him as his successor. Yue might have many enemies, but he also had many allies. It would confound people that His Majesty had named his younger brother and not his own son to follow him, but that could be dealt with; he only needed to tell Yue here and now that he was in fact Yoh's own child.

Even Yue would not be able to refuse a direct order from Yoh.

The other princes were still so young, and Yue was a superb administrator. Those two facts would far outweigh the lowly status of his birth mother, Ah-Duo. Plenty of families would be eager to back him.

It would, however, be a bolt from the blue for the Empress and her clan.

Yoh's Imperial affection fell fully upon Gyokuyou. It wasn't just her position; he genuinely liked her as a person. Ah-Duo herself had shared tea with Gyokuyou several times and thought she was a fine consort. At least, she wasn't the kind who would deliberately seek

to bring the country down from the inside.

It wasn't that Ah-Duo wanted to see Gyokuyou put in a difficult position. There was no need at this late date to reveal that her supposedly dead son yet lived.

Even if those involved understood, though, there must have been qualms. Yoh was not a person; he was Heaven itself. All others were merely people. Yoh could be permitted anything he might do so long as he was Emperor—so long as the mandate of heaven was not taken from him.

Heaven could treat people as it wished. It need not worry itself with what it meant to choose someone as a partner for the night on a whim. Heaven possessed the right and power to look after a person for her entire life.

Hence it need spare no concern for the matter.

Yoh was Heaven—but what about Yue? Was he the same? Ah-Duo had summoned Maomao here in order to find out. She wanted to know what choice Yue would make, if Maomao would be hemmed in, entrapped as Ah-Duo had been.

That had been the question on Ah-Duo's mind—but Yue was not Heaven, but a person.

Yoh was still looking at Ah-Duo. She looked back, hiding the place where the teardrop had fallen with her hand.

"Yoh," she said. "You heard what Yue said. What will you do?" She was fairly sure she had managed to sound like her usual self.

Yoh was quiet, agonizing—even though it was not for Heaven to show hesitation. This was why Ah-Duo never seemed to know what to do with him: these flashes of human frailty.

"Can they be sent home for the time being?" he said at last.

"Yes," she said.

Yoh must have decided to cool off and collect his thoughts, for he suggested breaking up the meeting.

Yue and Maomao were both agog at Yoh's behavior. Yue probably still didn't know why Ah-Duo was here, nor why she had summoned Maomao. He was such a perceptive boy, but still he didn't realize: There had been a time when he had called Yoh "Father."

People must have told him many times that he reminded them of Ah-Duo. And in fact, Ah-Duo had served as Yue's body double before.

If he actually did understand what the relationship was

between himself and Yoh, and was simply acting as though he didn't, that was fine too. Or perhaps Suiren had hidden the truth just that skillfully.

It didn't matter either way.

To Ah-Duo, Yue was human. She had been able to determine as much tonight.

To Ah-Duo, Yue was a son. But she was not able to say so. For him to remain human, he could not be her son.

"Are you quite sure about this?" Yue asked Yoh.

"Yes."

"What will you do about the surgery?"

"Don't fret. I will accept it, as I must."

Maomao looked even more relieved than Yue at that.

"And what about your will?" It was Ah-Duo, not Yue, who asked this hardest of questions.

"I'll write it later. For the time being, I want you to go."

Yue's face was filled with anxiety. Maomao looked uncertain as well, but not too distressed; it seemed that knowing Yoh would accept the surgery was what mattered to her.

"I suppose I should excuse myself, then." Ah-Duo got up to follow Yue and Maomao.

"Wait," said Yoh.

"For what?"

"I want something with you." He took her hand and would not let go.

"Yes, yes, very well. Don't mind us, kids—you go home."

Yue and Maomao shared a look, but left the room.

Once it was quiet, Yoh finally released Ah-Duo's hand.

"Don't ask me to take dictation on your will. If you die, I'll end up executed when people think I forged it."

"As if I would do such a thing." Yoh looked at the ceiling.

"You're not going to write that Yue should be the next emperor?" Yoh remained silent, so Ah-Duo went on. "If Yue were sitting in that seat, he would do the job perfectly well. And most likely abdicate of his own accord when the Crown Prince came of age." Still Yoh gazed up at the ceiling. "He might not be one of the greatest rulers known to history, but he certainly wouldn't be one of the worst."

Yoh's eyes were open wide.

Finally Ah-Duo said, "Can you live with yourself if you don't

tell Yue that you're his father?"

"Can't I write it down?"

"No. I'm not suited to be the mother of the nation, right?" Ah-Duo replied with self-deprecation. "You know, I really thought you were going to tell him—tell him about the mistake I made."

"You thought I was going to do that, and yet you're the one who deliberately brought in an outsider. That girl has less and less hope of ever running free again."

"I don't think it would be a problem to tell her. Maomao is clever."

"She ought to be; she's Lakan's daughter. If she ran off, I'm not sure we could catch her."

"If she ever tries, I'll be sure to help her."

"Whose side are you on?"

She saw now why Yoh gazed continually at the ceiling all throughout their conversation. He was trying not to let the tears spill out of his eyes. All this blustering talk was probably just an act so that he looked strong.

"Ah-Duo," he said. "Do you resent me?"

"Yoh," she replied. "Do you think I couldn't?"

"Is there something that I failed to give you?"

"Ha ha ha. That's the thing."

Yoh had been good to Ah-Duo. Both as the crown prince and once he became emperor, he had ensured that nothing would hamper her. Even after she left the rear palace, he had looked out for her, making clear to all and sundry that she was special.

"Did you wish you could have made me mother of the nation?" she asked.

"You were the one who asked me to, weren't you?" There was a scratch in Yoh's voice. "You'll keep your promise with me, won't you, Ah-Duo? So long as it stands?"

"I will. And on your part, how many promises to me have you broken?"

Ah-Duo reached out to her little partner in crime. Not to do anything so kind as to wipe away his tears—instead, she tugged on his beard.

"I suppose you assumed that even if you had set up the Crown Prince instead of Yue, I would be there while he was young."

"I did. Because you are honest and faithful."

Ah-Duo felt a flash of anger; she squeezed the beard in her hand

as if she might rip it straight out. “Setting up the crown prince would be an excellent way to control your other subjects. And were you of a mind to switch him with Yue when he grew up bold and strong? Or were you planning to break your promise to me? If you were, you should have just said so. How many years—how many decades—did you plan to keep me like a pet?”

It was vacillation, pure and simple. It shouldn’t have happened, but for Yoh, it would be allowed.

“If it were a political matter, you would have been able to make up your damn mind. I was useless baggage, and you should have just cut me loose!”

“You’re not baggage.”

“I am! Do you know how many years I spent being mocked as a consort with no part to play? No, you don’t. You look down from on high, content in the belief that the wars of women are not as brutal as those waged by men. It’s true; I suppose we don’t beat each other so often as you men do. Just the occasional stabbing, or poisoning, or setting on fire.”

Ah-Duo gave Yoh’s beard another good tug, forcing him to meet her eyes. The tears that had been gathering in his eyes spilled over with such force that they landed on Ah-Duo’s cheeks.

“I’m no longer able to bear children. When the child died, why didn’t you release me from my promise on the spot?”

“Ah-Duo. You won’t abandon the promise on your own. If you ever know for a fact that you can no longer keep it, in whatsoever form, I’m sure you’ll just go off somewhere without asking me.”

And yet, Ah-Duo was still there with Yoh.

“Was that it? Is that what tipped you off that the babies had been switched?” Ah-Duo found she couldn’t resist a smile. She’d always wondered how Yoh had found out, when she was certain that her conspirators Anshi and Suiren would never have betrayed her. “I must admit, you do know how I think.”

“Yes.”

“And since you know me so well, I’m sure you haven’t forgotten what I wanted to do.”

“No.”

Back when Yoh had been crown prince, he’d often snuck away when he was sick of studying, and the two of them would hide and eat snacks together, chatting idly as they ate.

“I’ll never be an official. So maybe I should be a merchant or

something."

Ah-Duo had been so bright and eager as she spoke those words —how many decades ago had that been now? But once she had spent the night with the Emperor as his "instructor," she lost any opportunity even to leave the rear palace, let alone to be a merchant.

There was no way Yoh could fail to understand that.

"Ordering me to spend the night together may have been a whim for you, but it has dogged me for my entire life," she said.

After a moment, Yoh said, "If you'd become a merchant, you might never have come back to the palace." His hair, which was starting to show streaks of white, seemed to droop. His cheeks, covered with whitening powder, were sunken. "You would have left me here and never come back."

"What does it matter if I'd stayed or if I'd gone? Without an order from you, I would never even see you, would I, Yoh?"

Ah-Duo certainly had no right to summon him. It was he who had the authority. Their positions in life had been fixed at birth. If Ah-Duo's mother Suiren hadn't happened to be Yoh's nursemaid, they would never have laid eyes on each other.

She understood what Yoh was trying to say: He could give her anything, but he could not *go* anywhere. He must have feared that Ah-Duo would go somewhere far away. At the tender age of twelve or thirteen, he couldn't have been able to give it much deep consideration.

"I didn't want to let you go anywhere," he said. "So I tried to keep my promise."

"A promise that benefits no one? Even though you knew I didn't really want to be mother of the nation?"

"That's right."

As Heaven, Yoh possessed, owned, the human called Ah-Duo.

What about Yoh's son, Yue? Would he walk the same path as his father? That was why Ah-Duo had summoned Maomao: to find out whether Yue intended to possess her or not.

Her fears had been groundless. Yue was not Heaven, but human.

"Ah-Duo... If you had become a merchant, could you have been my friend?"

"If you had allowed me to supply the Imperial court, I would have been very friendly indeed."

“Ha ha ha.” Yoh’s eyes narrowed, his face crinkling as he laughed.

“Listen. I have a favor to ask.” Ah-Duo let go of Yoh’s beard and wrapped her arms around his neck instead. She leaned in close to him, her palms picking up some of the whitening powder on his skin. “I’ll vacate our promise myself.”

“You mean you’ll leave me?”

Yoh was trying to raise his head; Ah-Duo did everything she could not to let him. “No, I’ll be with you until the end. The baggage in my pavilion is too heavy for anyone else to carry.”

There was Sui and the Shi clan children, and the shrine maiden of Shaoh.

“In exchange,” she whispered softly in his ear, “just let Yue do as he wishes. I’ll listen to you complain all you like. Until my very bones creak.”

Ah-Duo knew what hubris her request represented. Yue was her only son, and Yoh had other children—yet she was asking him to treat Yue special.

This was the greatest favor she could demand.

“The boy is part of the Imperial family, but he’s too nearly human. He’s too kind,” she said.

“Yes, I see.”

“He has the potential to become a wise ruler, but at the same time, I don’t think he would live for long.”

“Perhaps not.”

What an emperor needed was not kindness, but compassion, something that flowed from high to low. A ruler who saw himself as equal to his subjects would grow ill—and Yue had shown that he refused to involve the person who might cure that illness.

Ah-Duo knew she was doing wrong by Gyokuyou and Lihua and the other consorts. She was asking Yoh for something immensely selfish.

She was pushing a burden onto other children in order to protect her own.

“You failed. It was a mistake to let him take over the rear palace on a childish bet. Why did you make such a wager?”

“He’s more clever than we give him credit for, Ah-Duo.”

“Ha ha ha. Yes, he gave the consorts the runaround in the rear palace!”

“Yet never laid a finger on any of them.”

“It might have saved you the trouble of producing offspring, Yoh, but Yue well understood how much trouble it would be.”

Yoh’s head shifted in Ah-Duo’s arms. At least he had the mental space to laugh now.

“You should hurry and go to sleep,” she said. “You have a very uncomfortable surgery tomorrow.”

“Oh, don’t do that. Yes, I know. I’ll rest. We don’t want any unexpected side effects on account of me feeling weak from lack of sleep.”

“Not going to write your will after all?”

“I don’t plan to die.”

“Write it anyway. At least put down that it’s no crime if the physicians fail.”

Ah-Duo let Yoh go.

“Why, you’re assuming they’ll kill me!” He gave her a sulky look like someone much younger than he was.

“Maomao and her adoptive father are helping with the surgery. If it doesn’t work out, you’ll find yourself with the La clan for enemies.”

“Stop, stop! Lakan gave me enough trouble for banishing his uncle.”

“He won’t give you any trouble when those doctors mess up, because you won’t be in this world anymore.”

“I told you, stop assuming I’m going to die,” Yoh said, but he got out a writing set.

“I see your handwriting is still awful.”

“Pipe down.”

So Ah-Duo and Yoh began writing his will, bantering like children of ten.

Yoh was Heaven, and Ah-Duo was human. Yet they could, at least, act as if they were friends.

Chapter 17: Anxiety

Maomao and Jinshi left the room in confusion.

"What in the world happened?" Basen asked them the instant they were out.

"I'm not quite sure, but he chased us out," said Jinshi, looking shell-shocked. Nothing had been resolved yet. He didn't know exactly what the Emperor wanted to do, or what he would leave in his written will.

It looked to him as if His Majesty had recognized something, had come to a sort of conclusion on his own. Jinshi didn't know the exact truth of it, so he could only stare vacantly, oppressed by anxiety.

"His Majesty said he'll do the surgery," Maomao offered in Jinshi's stead.

"You mean it?" Gaoshun asked, looking deeply relieved.

"Yes, sir. It seems he still has something to discuss with Lady Ah-Duo; she's still in there."

"I see." Gaoshun gazed at the door. He, too, was the Emperor's milk sibling. Perhaps he felt left out.

"That being the case, may I leave?" Maomao asked. She was eager to have her dinner, get to bed, and get ready for the next day. Missing out on food and sleep would be a surefire way to undermine the quality of her work.

"Good idea. Let's go ahead and get out of here."

With Jinshi's agreement, Maomao and the others left, seen off by Gaoshun and Ba-something-or-other, who stayed behind to continue to guard the Emperor and Ah-Duo.

"Right, right! Miss Chue will see you safely home! Perhaps you'd like to stop for dinner somewhere on the way?" Chue chirped.

"I like that idea," Maomao said.

They were both getting into it, but they were interrupted by Jinshi, who said, "Oh!"

"Is something the matter, sir?" asked Maomao.

"Oh, ahem, no. Er, I just..." He hardly seemed to know what to

say.

"Hey!" Basen exclaimed, his vigor directed at Maomao and Chue.

"Yes?"

"It's already late. A couple of women shouldn't be out dining by themselves!"

"If that's how you feel, dear Little Brother-in-Law, come with us!" Chue drawled. "Drop off the Moon Prince first, and then there'll be no problem, right?"

"Hrm. Well, when you put it that way..." Basen started. It was clear from Jinshi's expression that that was not the issue he had been concerned about, but he couldn't say anything. "If you're going to drag me out to eat...I think we should get noodles."

"Noodles? Good idea! I know a great *toshomen* place!" said Chue.

"Ooh, *toshomen*!" Basen was unexpectedly eager. At least it sounded like he had actually eaten out before at some point in his life.

But he still can't read a room. Does he really expect to wed Lady Lishu like this? Maomao thought irreverently.

Jinshi, meanwhile, looked anguished. A member of the Imperial family could hardly go out for noodles in the middle of the night—so he couldn't exactly tell them he wanted to come along.

I'm sure the noodles he gets with his meals are way classier, Maomao thought. She was sure that when he got back to his pavilion the old lady, Suiren, would have a hot dinner waiting for him. The ingredients and the chefs were both top class, and it would have to taste better than some random noodle joint in town.

But that's that and this is this.

Going out for noodles was special, so Maomao could understand Jinshi's envy. She remembered how delicious the meat skewers seemed to have tasted to him when he'd been out on the town in disguise. Maybe a certain "commoner" flavor was to his liking.

She was starting to feel genuinely bad for him; she decided she had better throw him a lifeline. "Umm, you know, I'm pretty tired. Maybe I'll pass on eating out," she said.

"Aww, really?" Chue asked theatrically. Unlike Basen, she knew perfectly well what was going on. "What *do* you want to eat, then?"

Maomao paused. *This is where I'd like to bring up En'en's sweet-*

and-sour pork, she thought, but she said, "I think I'm in the mood for the abalone congee that Lady Suiren made for us once."

"O-Oh, yes!" Jinshi said, his spirits suddenly revived. "I'm sure Suiren would be more than willing to make you congee any time!"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Shall we eat at my pavilion before you go, then?"

"No, sir. It's already so late. If I could simply get some to take back with me..."

Maomao was angling for takeout.

"I see... No noodles..." It didn't look like Basen was eager to go out to eat with Chue by himself.

"Dear Little Brother. I have a riddle for you: If you hurried along now and told Lady Suiren to get the congee ready, what would happen?"

"It would save time?"

Maomao wouldn't have to wait as long for her food.

"That's right! So kindly skedaddle."

"Er...but who will guard the Moon Prince?"

"You're not his only bodyguard, right? It'll be *fine*. Get going!"

Basen shuffled off. Once he was out of sight, Chue turned to Jinshi and Maomao with a smile. "I'm terribly sorry, Moon Prince, but Miss Chue simply *must* go powder her nose. May I go ahead of you? Ah, yes! I don't think there's anything especially dangerous in this palace, so as long as you're in here, you should be okay without a guard."

"Y-Yes, I suppose so. Go ahead and use the bathroom."

"Oh, no, sir," Chue drawled. "It's not the *bathroom*. It's powdering my nose." She winked broadly and then ran off. It was all too obvious that this was a pretext to leave Jinshi and Maomao alone.

Jinshi's steps had slowed to the pace of a turtle, so Maomao matched him.

"Master Jinshi," she said.

"Yes?"

"Are you anxious?" She peered at him.

"What else could I possibly be?"

"What will you do if it turns out His Majesty's will names you as his successor?"

"What else? I suppose... I can't exactly shrug it off, can I?"

"Indeed, sir. It might cause considerable discord in the nation,

but I think everyone believes you'd be able to handle it somehow."

With Jinshi in charge of national affairs, so long as the world situation didn't get worse, the country seemed likely to enjoy an era of peace. It would be bought, however, with the life of a young man—neither god nor immortal—who would devote himself diligently and without rest to maintaining it.

"Would you be all right without me by your side at that time?"

After a second Jinshi said, "Don't put it that way. You make me want to make it an order."

In other words, Jinshi had no intention of putting Maomao in the difficult position of being a consort. This was the man who had once said he would make her his wife—but his consort, it seemed, he would not make her.

"Please don't burn your flank again. I want to see if I can do a skin graft before you do that."

"Skin graft?"

"You write it with the characters 'to plant skin.' There's a record of a time when a master who was burned had his slave's skin 'pasted' on to him."

Jinshi looked dismayed. "Does that work?"

"The record says it failed."

"It sounds like it would!"

"Yes, sir. But I wonder if the graft might adhere if it was the person's own skin. I would cut some flesh from the rump and—"

Jinshi reflexively put his hands on his behind.

"Sir! I would never take it by force."

"Please don't ever do that to me."

"Yes, sir."

Jinshi took his hands off his buttocks, although he still looked suspicious.

You'd think I was on the hunt for his ass!

Other parts would work just as well. She'd just figured the rear was wide enough that it would be easy to harvest from.

"Turnabout is fair play," Jinshi said. "Are *you* nervous, Maomao?"

"I should say so, sir."

"You don't look it."

True, she was probably less worried than Jinshi.

"My current goal is the success of the surgery. My greatest concern was that His Majesty wouldn't agree to the procedure, but

now that he's confirmed that he will, everything is all right."

"What comes after that doesn't bother you?"

"I have a special talent for forgetting troublesome things when I need to."

"Yes, I had an inkling..." In any case, Jinshi seemed to accept the situation. "I take it from your attitude that you have faith the surgery is going to succeed. You did say it had a ninety percent chance of working, but aren't you afraid of the other ten percent?"

"The surgery itself will succeed. I know it will, because Dr. Liu will be holding the scalpel, and my father Luomen will be assisting him. They've also cultivated a number of other physicians who are very skilled with a knife."

She didn't love that Tianyu was one of them, but there was nothing she could do about that.

As for the anesthetic that would be administered before the procedure, they would use a combination of needles and a drug with minimal toxicity.

Maomao's job would be to track His Majesty's progress after the surgery was over, so that worrisome ten percent would depend on what she and her colleagues did. But dissenting voices had been silenced, the patient's consent had been obtained, and as far as she was concerned, everything was as good as done.

"You're quite the optimist," Jinshi said.

"It's not optimism. I've mixed up enough poison for all the physicians involved to take some should anything happen."

Jinshi didn't say anything.

"We'll all be able to shuffle off this mortal coil with no pain and no sufferowowowow!"

Jinshi had taken a firm grip on Maomao's cheek.

“You are *not* to use that concoction under any circumstances.”

There are no absolutes here, I’m afraid.

Maomao decided, however, to refrain from saying anything that would further upset Jinshi. He was already tired from his encounter with the Emperor.

Even at a turtle’s pace, they eventually reached the exit. Jinshi looked disappointed to be there. But both he and Maomao had tomorrow to deal with. If they were to make it to what came after that, everything would have to be prepared and ready.

“Shall we go?” Maomao asked.

“Yes,” Jinshi replied, and they pushed open the heavy door of the palace.

Chapter 18: Before the Surgery

The procedure would begin at noon.

"Bandages, check! Salve, check!"

Maomao ticked off the supplies on her fingers for the umpteenth time.

They'd ground the medicine from the finest possible ingredients, making everything carefully to ensure there were no impurities. The bandages had been made from new cloth, torn into uniform pieces, and boiled to disinfect them.

Maomao was doing the final checks with Auntie Liu, as well as making sure the place was clean.

The Emperor's resting chamber was likewise ready and waiting. The room where he would be after the surgery was, needless to say, a special place. It was no ordinary bedchamber, but had another room specially built adjacent to it. There would be a physician in attendance there at all times. If anything unusual occurred, day or night, they would be able to see to His Majesty immediately.

The room was almost entirely white, furnishings kept to a minimum and purely aesthetic decorations avoided. This would minimize the number of places dust could collect and make the place easy to clean.

The bed itself had been the object of particular care. It was stocked with pillows of the perfect firmness, not too soft and not too hard, in deference to the fact that the Emperor would not be able to turn very much in his sleep. The pillows were even stacked to support his body.

The most unusual thing was that there were two beds right next to each other. Why would they do that? It was because they would change the sheets every single day. Sweat and skin excretions could give rise to mold and insects. Bedding probably would have been fine for a few days at a time, but this was the Emperor they were talking about. To make sure he got the best rest possible, the sheets would be changed even if they were merely damp with sweat. Each time they were changed, the staff would have His Majesty moved to

the other bed.

I wonder how much a superluxurious bed costs.

The beds were not lavishly accessorized, but Maomao wondered how many silk outfits could be made from even one of those canopies.

Initially, there had been a suggestion that there should be two entirely separate rooms, and that the Emperor should move between them while the sheets were changed and the cleaning done, but others objected that moving him was a risk, so this was the solution they had come to. In addition, ample attention would be paid to ventilation while cleaning, and care would be taken not to stir up too much dust.

All the palace physicians were of one resolve: Whatever happened, they *would* make sure the Emperor survived.

The surgical suite was adjacent to the bedchamber so that the Emperor could be moved immediately once the procedure was over. No expense had been spared if it would improve the odds of the surgery succeeding. Thanks to this arrangement, Maomao could see the Emperor lying there from where she was.

They had requested His Majesty to take no meals starting the day before, and already had him lying on the surgical table. They'd administered the anesthetic not long ago and also planned to use needles to dull the pain.

Choosing the right anesthetic sure was difficult.

They'd settled on a concoction focused on hemp, which had some addictive qualities but would not present issues as long as it wasn't used long-term. Maomao wasn't sure how much it would lessen the pain, but they would just have to ask the Emperor to endure what remained.

As far as Maomao could tell, the Emperor seemed calm.

Maybe Lady Ah-Duo was able to talk him around.

She didn't know what kind of will he had left, but she was determined that it wouldn't be necessary.

Something nagged at her, though.

Isn't he a little too *calm?*

The Emperor looked oddly at peace, despite the fact that he had no makeup concealing his pallor.

"Everything look normal?" Maomao asked the physician checking the effect of the anesthetic.

"Yeah, pretty good." The doctor seemed relieved, but Maomao

was still unsettled.

Dr. Liu and Luomen were having their last discussion. They'd spoken to the Emperor briefly before the anesthetic had been administered.

He still looked like he was in pain then.

So the anesthetic was doing its job. That was good. But Maomao thought it had worked a little too quickly.

This seems oddly familiar.

She was almost sure she'd seen something written somewhere about when appendicitis pain abruptly receded.

I'm pretty sure it said...

"What's the matter?" Auntie Liu asked Maomao.

"I'm sorry. I need to go back to the medical office. Is that all right?"

"Yes, it's fine. We're just about set here."

"Thank you."

Maomao hurried to the medical office. The postsurgical team was there, and looked startled when she burst in, out of breath.

"What's going on?" asked Tall Senior.

"Wh... Where's Kada's Book?" Maomao gasped out.

"Over here." One of the physicians took her to a room in the back. Ordinarily it was kept locked, so only authorized personnel could get in.

Maomao sank her proverbial teeth into the book.

"Hey! Not so rough, you'll tear it!"

Maomao ignored the voice, looking desperately through the pages.

Not here... Not here either.

Where was it? Finally her eyes alighted on the sentence.

"When the appendix ruptures, pain may temporarily subside."

"This is it!" she said, holding up the book triumphantly.

"I said, be gentle with that!" the physician cried, but Maomao showed him the page.

"I'm concerned about what it says here. Read this."

"Easy for you to say..." The physician squinted at the characters, which were written in an unfamiliar style. "Hm? Something about the pain subsiding? We gave him the anesthetic. The pain shouldn't be a problem."

"I know. But don't you think it should have taken a little longer for His Majesty's pain to go away?" Maomao looked for the

materials on the anesthesia experiments but couldn't find them. "The anesthetic should take a little more time to kick in."

The physician paused. "Maybe we should report it to Dr. Liu, just in case."

Maomao and the others hustled to the room where Dr. Liu was conversing with Luomen.

Dr. Liu was clearly displeased to be interrupted in the middle of his conversation. Luomen and all the other physicians present looked distressed by the intrusion of Maomao and her party.

"What in the world is going on?" Dr. Liu demanded.

"We're concerned about His Majesty's status," Tall Senior said.

"Cut to the chase."

From the moment he heard the words *His Majesty*, Dr. Liu was ready to listen. He knew very well that it was impossible to predict how an illness might progress, and where a clue that it had might come from—it could be in the smallest change.

"The anesthetic was administered only a short while ago, but he already says he feels no pain," Maomao said, showing Dr. Liu Kada's Book.

Dr. Liu and Luomen peered at it, their faces grim. "All right, this conference is over. I want you all to get ready as quickly as you can and get to your posts," Dr. Liu said, and then he proceeded toward the surgical room at a brisk trot. "Tell me how he's looking."

"I think Maomao would be best placed..." Tall Senior said, giving her the lead. Dr. Liu tapped Tall Senior on the shoulder and jerked a thumb in Luomen's direction. An instruction to help Luomen to the operating room.

"Maomao. Situation?" Dr. Liu asked.

"Yes, sir." Maomao had to jog to keep up with the doctor's long strides. "His Majesty was experiencing stomach pain when you and Dr. Kan examined him an hour ago."

"That's right."

"The anesthetic was administered about thirty minutes ago, I believe. When the physician asked His Majesty how he was feeling shortly after, His Majesty reported that there was no pain."

"Shortly after?"

Dr. Liu's strides became even longer. Luomen walked behind them, supported by Tall Senior. Dr. Liu stopped in front of the

operating room and took a deep breath.

"Dr. Liu," said the physician who had examined the Emperor. "Aren't you a bit early?"

"What's His Majesty's status?"

"Sir? He's stable. The anesthetic seems to be working brilliantly, and—"

A glare from Dr. Liu stopped the explanation in its tracks.

"Liu, you can't go giving people that look," Luomen admonished him as he and Tall Senior arrived.

He and Dr. Liu went into the operating room. Maomao and Tall Senior prepared to wait outside, but Dr. Liu turned and said, "I want you both in here."

Is that all right? Maomao wondered, checking her outfit to make sure there were no stains or dirt.

"What is it?" the Emperor asked as they entered. His eyes were unfocused.

The anesthetic is working.

"How are you feeling? Any nausea or pain?" Dr. Liu asked.

"I feel very calm. Your medicine must be working. Why didn't you give this stuff to me ages ago?"

"Because it won't help nearly so much if you overuse it, sir. And it can create dependency."

The difference between an anesthetic and a narcotic was in how you used it.

"I'd like to perform a physical examination. All right?"

"Sure."

Dr. Liu touched the lower right of the Emperor's abdomen. "How does that feel?"

"No pain," the Emperor replied.

Dr. Liu looked less than thrilled. "I'll be back in a moment."

He left the operating room, and practically no sooner was he through the door than he stamped on the ground like a child throwing a tantrum. Auntie Liu, still cleaning nearby, gave him a worried look.

"Of all the times!" Pressing on the site had convinced him. "I think it just ruptured."

"Well, that's no good," Auntie Liu said.

"You're blasted right it's no good!"

It was hard to blame Dr. Liu for being upset. The whole point of moving as fast as they could to do surgery was to fix the problem

before the appendix ruptured. If it spread filth throughout the body, other illnesses could follow.

"Is something the matter, sir?" asked the doctors of the surgical team, who had just arrived.

"We're moving the surgery up. Get ready," Dr. Liu said.

"Yes sir," the others answered. Realizing this was an emergency, they hopped to their tasks, readying equipment and changing into surgical garments.

Maomao prepared extra gauze. They had plenty already, but there would never be any harm in having more. They would probably use scads of it cleaning out the filth.

"Yikes!"

"Whoa, what are you doing?!"

"Sorry..."

A doctor in a surgical gown had nearly fallen, rescued only by the other physicians holding him up. The doctors might act cool, but the panic was starting to show.

And that's going to invite mistakes.

Maomao took a deep breath, telling herself to calm down.

In the operating room, they were placing the needles in the Emperor's honored body. With other patients, the needles and the drugs had been shown to help with pain when administered at the right moment, but Maomao worried how the effect might change on an accelerated schedule.

In the middle of it all was one man who looked totally unperturbed—who, in fact, seemed excited.

"Hm-hmmm!"

It was Tianyu, so at ease that he even had it in him to hum! He was like a child enjoying a special trip.

There might be endless questions about his humanity, but in moments like this he was completely calm, so there was no need to worry about him. He almost seemed to be enjoying the danger.

"Well, now I'm glad I ate my meal early," said Auntie Liu, methodically and soberly getting ready.

"We certainly won't have any chance to eat now," Maomao agreed.

"Yes, and who wants to do surgery on an empty stomach?" Auntie Liu smiled. She went to where the members of the postsurgical team were waiting and tapped them on the shoulders. "All right, you lot. If you don't have anything to do, grab a light

meal. There won't be time for it once the procedure is over."

Now, that's mental fortitude!

She hadn't lived such a long life for nothing. No wonder Dr. Liu had brought her along.

Chapter 19: During the Surgery

The surgery began.

Maomao and the others on the postsurgical team waited outside the operating room.

Dr. Liu would be wielding the scalpel, with two upper physicians as well as Tianyu assisting. Luomen's bad leg left him unable to stand holding a knife for very long, but he was stationed in the operating room so they could benefit from his wealth of experience.

For all their history, I think Dr. Liu likes my old man.

The chief physician might gripe and grumble, but he trusted Luomen implicitly. Otherwise he wouldn't have him there to offer advice should anything happen.

With that crew present, they should be able to handle some unexpected development.

Then, however, Maomao heard a crash from the operating room.

Did something happen?

There was a collective gasp as Dr. Liu emerged, blood pouring from his right hand. In the operating room, a doctor was collapsed on the floor, his face pale.

"What's going on?!" someone exclaimed.

"Calm down," Dr. Liu said in a low voice. "It happens all the time."

"I'll explain," said Luomen, who emerged behind him, walking with his cane. "Liu, you focus on stopping the bleeding."

"All right."

"It seems the effect of the anesthetic wasn't quite strong enough for His Majesty. Just as the assistant was passing Liu a scalpel, His Majesty's arm moved, and the blade nearly cut it. The doctor instinctively avoided that, but unfortunately hit Liu instead."

The man on the ground in the operating room was the first assistant, one of the upper physicians. He'd stuck a scalpel into Dr. Liu's dominant hand, even if he hadn't meant to, and the shock of

doing something so awful must have overwhelmed him.

"We can look for the lessons to be learned later. For now, we have to go on with the surgery," Luomen said placidly, looking at each of the people around him in turn. "I think the young man needs to wait here outside until he's feeling calmer. Would someone kindly bring him out?"

"Yes, sir." Tall Senior went into the operating room and helped the shocked first assistant to his feet.

"Now, as to our surgeon..."

The other upper physician was the second assistant. With the first assistant effectively useless, the second would have to do it. He was clearly scared out of his wits. "I... I couldn't! I can't!" His face contorted and his hands shook.

That left only one person.

Why did it have to be him, of all people? Maomao wanted to clutch her head.

While everyone else cowered and panicked and stewed in anxiety, one man stood looking absolutely the same as he always did.

"Tianyu, will you do the job?" Luomen asked, looking at him.

Tianyu pursed his lips and looked at the ceiling. Maomao would have expected him to jump at the opportunity, but evidently not. "Hmmm," he said.

"What's the matter? You're not going to do it?"

Concern mounted among the doctors.

"Aww, it just sort of takes the wind out of my sails, you know? Everyone talks about the 'jade body,' so I was sure he must have gold blood flowing in his veins!"

The doctors exchanged a look that said: *What the hell is he talking about?*

Maomao was better acquainted with Tianyu's personality than the rest of the staff. She knew about his interest in autopsies, and that he had become a physician not out of any altruistic desire to help others, but simply because it would give him a legal means to chop people up and observe their insides.

That absolute crackpot had been curious about the "jade body" of the Emperor himself, but now that they had actually opened it up, so to speak, he'd discovered that His Majesty was nothing unique. He was made of the same stuff as the commoners Tianyu had operated on.

It was just like the surgeries he'd practiced. Of course he was disappointed.

Some guy...

"Foo... I think I'm tired of this."

"What do you mean, tired of it?!"

"Let someone else do it," Tianyu said.

"What?!" the physicians exclaimed in unison. Unfamiliar with Tianyu's mental framework, they were at a loss for how to respond. Even Luomen looked more distressed than usual.

If this surgery went wrong, everyone there could die, but that didn't concern Tianyu. To him, it was a simple procedure. The other physicians had probably likewise assumed he could do it easily. His hand never shook from nerves.

Maybe I should explain, Maomao thought, but there wasn't even time for that. Tianyu would get hung up on some stupid detail, she felt sure.

"Is that so?" Luomen looked at Dr. Liu, who was still trying to stanch the bleeding from his hand.

"I'll do it," Dr. Liu said.

"You can't, Liu. You have to stop bleeding first. And you have to make sure your hand can still move."

"So, what? You're going to do it?"

"I suppose so—it seems to be our only option. We can't leave this any longer." Luomen was quick to appraise the situation. "Do we have any backup assistants?"

"Here, sir." One of the middle physicians raised his hand. He was clearly anxious, but just as clearly prepared to do what he had to do.

"Go inside. And I want..." Luomen looked around. As everyone shuddered and quailed, he tapped Tall Senior, who had entrusted the incapacitated first assistant along with Dr. Liu to Auntie Liu, on the shoulder.

"Do you have experience assisting in surgery?" Luomen asked.

"Yes, sir," Tall Senior said.

"Can you do it?"

"Yes, sir."

He slapped himself hard on the cheek, then pulled on a spare surgical gown.

"And you, Maomao," Luomen said. "Do you know how to assist?"

“I do.”

“All right, well, I’ll need you to support me. I can’t very well do the surgery while sitting in a chair.”

“I understand, sir.”

Maomao immediately began getting ready. She put on one of the surgical gowns, but it was too big. She tied the sleeves back so they wouldn’t get in the way.

Luomen turned to the frightened second assistant. “You may not be able to wield the scalpel, but you can at least assist, can’t you?”

“Yes,” the man said slowly, biting his lip, and then he went into the operating room.

“Hey, what about me?” Tianyu asked, obviously puzzled.

“We don’t need you,” said not Luomen, but Maomao. “You’ll just get in the way. You can stay out here sucking your thumb. It’s the only thing your hand is good for if you’re not willing to do surgery with it.”

She was careful not to raise her voice, but she was angry—of course she was. He vexed her to no end.

“Once this procedure is safely over, maybe I can ask the Emperor for a favor,” Maomao joked, but no one replied. They were too busy. “Maybe I’ll have him give me a few of your fingers, Tianyu. If you don’t have any use for them, I can dry them out and put them on display—tell people they belong to a mummy! At least they’d serve *some* purpose then!”

Oops, now she was really leaning into it. She barely even cared that she was addressing him without any title of respect. The crowd around them muttered, but she ignored them. She had to say something, or the fury would keep her from doing her job.

“Maomao. That’s enough,” Luomen said.

Maomao didn’t say anything. She would have liked to add two or three more choice bits of invective, but she refrained. It was more important to hurry up so they could resume the surgery.

The moment they walked into the operating room, Luomen went to work. They couldn’t leave things one moment longer with the abdomen already cut open.

Maomao held Luomen up so he wouldn’t get tired. The second assistant became the first assistant, the backup assistant became the second assistant, and Tall Senior served as the third assistant.

“Scalpel,” Luomen said.

“Sir,” the first assistant said, passing him a fresh knife as he stabilized the surgical site. The second assistant kept mopping up blood and filth with gauze, producing an ever-growing pile of the stuff stained yellowish-red. The third assistant—that is, Tall Senior—took the used gauze and threw it away, then brought fresh; he was especially busy.

We could probably use one more assistant just to do the little chores.

Luomen cut carefully and precisely. As the blood was wiped away, they could see the object of their operation.

“I suppose I’m glad it was indeed appendicitis,” said Luomen. The organ, like a protruding worm, was attached to the large intestine.

The assistants looked at Luomen, worried. Their heads and mouths were covered with cloth to ensure that no saliva or hair got into the incision, but just their exposed eyes were enough to show how shaken they were.

“Why so shocked? We’ve done this procedure before. You were with me, Xiaodong.” It was the name of one of the other men—the first assistant nodded. “As we expected, filth has come out of the appendix. But it hasn’t been very long, so if we keep our cool and clean it up, it should be fine. Shensong is always attentive to detail. I know he can handle this.”

The second assistant nodded too.

“And—Dr. Wang, isn’t it? I’m sorry, I don’t remember your given name. I know you’re a man of fortitude. Just keep up the work you’re doing.”

“My given name is also Wang, sir. A different character.”

“Ah, I see. I’ll remember that.”

Wang Wang…

In that moment, Maomao learned Tall Senior’s name. She found it inspired an unexpected sense of closeness to him.

Luomen began to gently peel the appendix away from the large intestine, working quickly but very carefully so as not to damage the latter.

My old man is incredible, Maomao thought, unable to suppress the shock of amazement as she watched his hands move. She saw Dr. Liu had had a very good reason for including him on the surgical team.

Luomen, however, lacked one very important thing.

Maomao could feel him growing heavier and heavier as he

leaned against her.

Luomen had lost a kneecap when he had been sentenced to physical mutilation. Hence, he had trouble walking, as well as standing for long periods. Maomao had spent many years ministering to Luomen, so she knew the knack for helping him stand. But amid the tension of surgery, even Luomen grew tired, no matter how accomplished he was.

Sweat dribbled down Luomen's forehead, and (Tall) Senior Wang Wang wiped it away.

Once the appendix was successfully detached from the large intestine, Luomen grabbed it with a pair of tweezers. "Can you hold this?" he asked the first assistant.

"Yes, sir," the other man said, taking the tweezers.

"Make sure you hold it up, but don't pull too hard."

Luomen fixed the wormlike part in place. His work was still exemplary, but his movements lacked the crispness they'd had earlier. He was growing ever heavier against Maomao. She gritted her teeth, holding him up with all her strength.

Come on, hurry!

Maomao was starting to panic. An hour had passed in the blink of an eye.

The wormlike part had been cut away and placed in a metal tray. There were careful stitches in the large intestine.

Yikes...

Luomen had to concentrate until it was completely finished. Maomao felt his weight slump against her; she struggled to hold him up, but he fell to his knees.

"Are you all right?!" Senior Wang Wang exclaimed, helping Luomen up.

"Do pardon me..."

Luomen was white as a sheet. He was pushing himself, and they all knew it. His hand was trembling. His breath came hard. Wang Wang helped him to a chair, but it was clear he couldn't wield the scalpel anymore.

He'd taken out the source of the problem, but the belly was still open.

"The operation isn't over yet," he said.

All that's left is to sew it up.

The first and second assistants wore expressions that said *I can't.* They were completely terrified.

Dr. Wang Wang didn't look much better, but he at least had the presence of mind to summon help from outside the operating room. Maomao doubted, however, that there would be any doctors able and willing to sew up the jade body.

Maomao filled in for Wang Wang, preparing the needle and thread.

If no one else is going to do it, I will, she thought. Otherwise, this would never be over.

"Pops, keep an eye on me and make sure I get this right."

Maomao picked up the needle, which was shaped like a fish hook, with a pair of tweezers. Her left shoulder was going numb from supporting her father for so long.

It's all right. It's all right.

Her right hand felt fine.

This is the first time I've done this on a real person's abdomen...

She'd sewn people's arms and legs a few times before, though, and had assisted at several surgeries.

I can do this.

"Hullo. Trade out, if you please."

Maomao's attempts to psych herself up were interrupted by a breezy voice. A man was standing next to her, and the coverings around his mouth and head couldn't conceal the intense curiosity in his eyes.

"What are you here for, Tianyu?"

"You were always nasty to me, Niangniang, but now you've given up even the pretense of being polite." Tianyu snatched the tweezers from her.

"Give that back!" Maomao tried to grab them from him, but a tingle shot through her arm as she reached for them, and she was left scowling.

"Don't think so. Tell me, is your left arm tingling? You can't sew like that, can you?"

He was right, but since no one else was volunteering, she had no choice.

"I thought you weren't interested in a normal human body that didn't flow with golden blood."

"That's true."

"Then get out. The only thing here is a normal person that we happen to describe as having a jade body. If he dies, he'll be just a normal lump of meat. I'm not going to get thrown to the wolves just

because you're not personally interested. I don't care if *you* die, but do it on your own. Me and the rest of the medical staff happen to *like* living!"

"But if I *don't* do this, you'll cut off my fingers and dry them for prizes, right? Let me—what's the expression?—get my honor back."

"Like hell. You can't half-ass this! Now scram, you're in my way." Maomao stamped her feet.

"Maomao. *Calm down*," said Luomen. Auntie Liu had come in at some point and given him a damp rag.

“Say, mister. If this surgery succeeds, we’ll get to do harder and harder operations, won’t we?” Tianyu asked.

Who’s he calling mister?!

Now Maomao was angry that Tianyu had dreamed up this obnoxious way to refer to her old man. But Luomen simply said, “That’s right. There are many people in this world with strange diseases or born with unusual anatomies. There are even some people whose organs are all flip-flopped.”

“Oooh!” Tianyu’s eyes shone.

Dr. Liu came in, a bandage wrapped around his hand. It was still stained with red. “If you want to see the most-interesting cases, you have to become a doctor worthy of meeting those patients. Don’t decide whether to do surgery just based on your personal feelings.”

“I’m not saying I won’t do it,” Tianyu objected.

“Then do it! Show skills that will have your patients *begging* you to work on them. You hear me?”

Tianyu’s eyes went from goggling to completely focused. He was looking at the Emperor’s still-open surgical site.

Maomao watched him silently. She bit her lip, but there was nothing she could do. Tianyu was better at suturing than she was. He’d proven that all too well with Xiaohong.

“Maomao,” said Dr. Liu. “Watch him closely to make sure he doesn’t get any funny ideas.”

“Yes sir,” she said, and Dr. Liu left again. Luomen was obviously still tired, but he at least stuck around to observe.

“Since you’re here, Niangniang, you might as well be my assistant. I think you get how I work better than the other doctors.”

Maomao still didn’t say anything. Feeling deeply humiliated, she prepared a fresh needle and scissors.

I swear, I swear*, I’m going to get better than this guy!*

Infuriated though she was, Maomao still watched Tianyu’s quick, delicate work, intent on absorbing everything she could.

Chapter 20: After the Surgery

After that, the surgery ended uneventfully. It wrapped up so quickly, it was almost as if all the excitement had never happened.

To Maomao's intense irritation, Tianyu's work was beautiful. She put salve and a bandage on the Emperor's impeccably sutured stomach.

All right, now we've got to clean up...

The operating room was a mess of bloody instruments, along with a pile of blood- and filth-soaked gauze. The moment the assistants, dripping sweat, got out of the room, they slumped into chairs.

Maomao did the same.

It hadn't actually taken that long. It had been hardly two hours from the time they had made the incision, including the interruption. And yet she felt many times, maybe many dozens of times, more exhausted than from her usual work.

"Okay, yes, fine work," said Auntie Liu, hustling the nearly immobile Maomao from where she had collapsed in the hallway. While Auntie Liu hadn't been directly involved in the surgery, there was the distinct sense that without her, things would not have gone nearly so well. She was just that talented a helper.

Maomao remembered Auntie Liu wrapping her arms around her and dragging her away.

After that, nothing.

No matter how tired she was, after some sleep, work began.

"Ah, finally up?" said Auntie Liu, who was making the bed next to Maomao's. Maomao struggled to grasp what was going on through the brain fog.

"Where am I?" she asked.

It wasn't her room in the dormitory, she knew that much. It was a cramped chamber with a row of three cots.

"We're in the postsurgical team's room. They made us a place all to ourselves, knowing we would have to sleep here."

“I see…”

The blood started making its way to Maomao’s head. Yes, she did vaguely remember that they had set up such a room.

“But why are there three beds?”

The postsurgical team had only two women, Maomao and Auntie Liu.

“I think they called in some redoubtable helper, just to be safe,” Auntie Liu said.

“A helper?”

“Yes, yes. I can see you’re still waking up. Go get something to eat, and maybe take a bath. You are a sight to see! You haven’t changed since the surgery yesterday.”

“Ugh!” Maomao said when she looked at her outfit. She was still wearing the white apron smeared with blood and filth.

“Now, now, don’t do that. That came from the jade body.”

“Blood is blood,” Maomao said. No sooner had she gotten off the bed than she stripped off the disgusting surgical garment and threw it away.

Once she had changed every scrap of clothing, Maomao headed to work.

What to do about this?

They’d already decided everything in discussions prior to the surgery—she simply had to follow the plan.

“I’m afraid His Majesty can’t hold any audiences for a while.”

“He what?!”

The indignant cry came from some self-important person being denied a meeting with the Emperor. Gaoshun stood guard before the door. It seemed he was there because he could effectively decline even the more influential would-be visitors.

Maomao slipped inside, careful not to let those influential visitors notice her.

The other half of the postsurgical team was already hard at work.

“Ah, feeling better?”

“Yes, Dr. Wang Wang.”

Inside was Tall Senior—a.k.a. Wang Wang.

“You really started calling me by my name out of the blue.”

Well, it was an easy one to remember.

“You think so?” Maomao said. “Maybe you’re imagining it.”

“Well, whatever,” Dr. Wang Wang said. “His Majesty is asleep at the moment. The surgical team is going to join the aftercare efforts. Help make sure everyone is assigned to whatever task fits them best.”

“Certainly.”

Maomao kept walking, ready to get down to business.

It looked like there would be no rest for some time to come.

They observed no abnormalities in the several days after the surgery. A great many important people came seeking audiences with the Emperor, but all were rebuffed.

The enforced rest must have been having an effect, because none of the feared complications had arisen, at least so far. No doubt it helped that the assisting physician had cleaned the filth out of the abdomen so thoroughly during the surgery.

They changed the dressings twice a day, when Dr. Liu and his cohort came in to check on the progress of the surgical site. Quite frankly, the doctors believed that once a day would have been sufficient, but there were some obnoxious high bureaucrats who had insisted on ridiculous things like checking the site every hour or something like that. They evidently didn’t imagine that too many unnecessary checks could actually increase the chance of toxins getting into the wound. The two times a day were a compromise.

Much as it felt like a waste, Maomao got rid of the used bandages. Bandages for soldiers could be washed, disinfected, and recycled repeatedly—but dressings from the Emperor, if carelessly reused, could be considered a gift from him. Just another troublesome aspect of dealing with the Imperial family.

The Emperor would be on a liquid diet for a while—they’d spoken with the royal chefs to arrange it. Every time Maomao saw them at work, she remembered nursing consort Lihua. The Emperor grimaced each time he was presented with his thin gruel, but he never complained.

His belly hurt because it had been cut open, but the chronic pain and nausea were gone.

Meanwhile, the doctors handled changing the Emperor’s clothes and bathing him when they changed his dressings. Why couldn’t the ladies-in-waiting or palace women do it? They claimed it was so no coquettishly dressed women might approach His Majesty.

Not that even He of the Prodigious Facial Hair would probably be in

a mood to lay a finger on them, Maomao thought.

The palace ladies might get some funny ideas, thinking this was a perfect opportunity. Every ambitious woman in the palace with her parents' hopes lying heavy on her shoulders was looking for a chance to become an Imperial mistress.

Such dalliances couldn't be permitted with a convalescent, of course, and even Empress Gyokuyou was asked to refrain from visiting His Majesty.

Maomao and Auntie Liu took care of cleaning the room, along with the special helper who had been called in: Suiren. That was who the third bed in the nap room had been for.

Cleaning with Suiren was, in fact, exactly what Maomao was doing at that moment. They were moving methodically but swiftly, taking extreme care to not send dust flying into the air as they worked. Maomao thought back on when she had been assigned directly to Jinshi and cowered a little. It brought back memories of —well, not torture, but some very stern scoldings.

She really does seem like she can do anything.

She was Jinshi's lady-in-waiting, yes, but before that she had been nursemaid to the Emperor himself. That must make it easy for him to get along with her.

"There are no flowers in here," came a voice from behind the curtain of the bed as Maomao cleaned. It belonged to none other than the Emperor himself.

"Oh, heavens, how can you say that? You know, in my time, people compared me to the lotus, just like my name. Whose fault is it that I'm a white-haired old lady now?" Suiren shot back, even as she hummed.

There was an audible silence from the doorway, where a guard was glaring at her. He appeared to be contemplating what to do with an old woman who took such a flippant tone with the Emperor. He was probably a member of the Ma clan, but now (as Maomao understood all too well) he was put between a rock and a hard place by this uniquely special old lady.

Normally they'd probably drag her off for insulting royalty, thought Maomao—but even the Emperor deferred to Suiren. *I wonder whose idea this was.*

The Emperor, who just had to lie there with nothing to entertain him, seemed to be enjoying Suiren's banter. If anything, it seemed like anyone who tried to stop Suiren would be the one who

got punished.

"Who suckled you at her own breast and changed your diaper?"

"I take no responsibility for anything I was too young to remember," the Emperor replied. "However... I *am* grateful to you for saving me from that assassination attempt."

It would substantiate the reputation of the legendary lady-in-waiting who had protected the young Emperor. Maomao wanted to ask what kind of stage-drama-worthy events they were referring to, but she decided it wouldn't be wise to pursue the question too deeply, and instead kept polishing with her cloth.

"Did Ah-Duo face the same thing?" the Emperor asked.

"Yes! You didn't know?"

"I didn't. She never said a word."

"Goodness gracious me..." Suiren sounded quite at ease, but Maomao thought she detected a hint of resentment in her voice as well. "I guess she really should have fled this court once she had a bit of money saved up."

"She was thinking of doing that?" the Emperor said, sounding as if it were news to him.

I can sure sympathize with the desire to get away!

"Well, that girl never did like women's clothing, did she? She was such a tomboy! You would never have taken her for someone who could be a palace lady even if she'd stayed, would you? She was actually talking about taking the money she'd made and becoming a merchant."

"Until I interfered with her plans, as I gather."

"I knew you were quick on the uptake."

Now it wasn't just the guard; Maomao, too, felt a chill. Still, she knew the Emperor would never punish Suiren, so she forced herself to keep breathing and try to calm down.

"Since you're here, Suiren... About Zui."

"Yes?"

"Does he know?"

Know what?

Maomao understood that they were talking about the circumstances of Jinshi's birth. She'd been sure the Emperor was going to tell him the day before the surgery, but no such shocking confession had been forthcoming, and Jinshi and Maomao had been summarily ejected from the meeting.

What had Ah-Duo and the Emperor discussed after that? Was

Jinshi aware that he was their child, or not? Even Maomao didn't know.

"If he knows or if he doesn't, it makes no difference either way," Suiren said, never stopping in her work.

True enough.

Whether Jinshi knew or not wouldn't change anything. Any change would be in those around him. And so long as the Emperor chose not to say anything, nothing would happen. She suspected His Majesty would not be raising the subject again.

"Now, Young Master, Granny's done cleaning—you won't be lonely, will you? I could read a story to you, if you like," Suiren said.

Hrk!

Maomao slapped her hand over her mouth before she could spit out the sound she was threatening to make—but she was holding a cloth, so it became a sort of *Urgh!*

The guard looked like he was suffering too. He was biting his lip and digging his fingernails into his thigh, struggling not to laugh.

"Don't call me that," the Emperor said—words Maomao knew well from hearing them from Jinshi.

"I'll be going, then!" Suiren said and left the room.

Maomao made to follow her, but the Emperor said, "Lakan's daughter. Maomao, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir." Maomao halted and turned around.

"If I should die, will I be nothing but a lump of meat?"

Maomao almost choked, and sweat started pouring off of her.

Don't tell me...

Had he been aware of what was happening throughout the surgery? He hadn't made a peep, so she'd just assumed he was unconscious.

"People speak of the jade body, but yes, it's made of flesh. And I don't bleed gold, but regular red blood."

"Ho ho ho ho ho!" Maomao said—the closest thing to a laugh she could manage with her face twitching so hard.

How calm and collected is he that he could stay silent and wait through everything that was happening?!

Maomao had the distinct sense that the guard was glaring at her now.

"Have you said the same sort of thing to Zui?"

“The same sort of thing, sir?”

She’d said far too many things to Jinshi, in fact, and wasn’t sure which one he meant.

I guess I might have said the sort of thing that would put a scratch on the jade…

Maomao was starting to worry, but the Emperor’s beard just swayed gently. “In any event. It seems my moving my hand during surgery caused no end of trouble.”

“Don’t give it a thought, please.”

Yes, she *did* wish he hadn’t done that—but it couldn’t be helped now. She was just impressed that he had endured the entire thing without making a fuss about the pain.

“I must say, it’s an experience I’ve never had before. It felt like I was in a haze—something felt wrong in my stomach, and the doctors kept bustling about. I think Luomen noticed, but he told me it was nothing. I don’t suppose it was true.”

Maomao pressed her hands together without quite meaning to. Luomen must have intervened to stop her in part because the Emperor had still been alert.

“Fear not,” the Emperor said. “As you can see, I’m doing fine. The incision still hurts and itches, but there’s nothing to be done about that. What matters is that Ah-Duo told me to write in my will that the physicians should not be punished.”

“She did, sir?” Maomao looked at the ceiling and gave thanks to Ah-Duo.

“Yes, and so I should like to say that you have nothing to worry about.” The Emperor looked down, deep in thought. “But in that case, my will would come into conflict with your wishes, Maomao, and I’ve been pondering what to do.”

“*My* wishes?”

“You said you wanted a reward, did you not?”

Maomao crossed her arms and thought.

“I believe you were asking for the fingers of one of the physicians. It sounded far away, but it was a woman’s voice, so it had to be either you or Liu’s little sister. Perhaps I misheard.”

Maomao froze.

“Maybe I’ll have him give me a few of your fingers, Tianyu. If you don’t have any use for them, I can dry them out and put them on display —tell people they belong to a mummy! At least they’d serve some *purpose then!”*

That was what she'd said. Oh, yes, she'd said it, all right.

"Er, well... Ahem. I wasn't, you know, being entirely serious..."

"I suppose not. I for one don't wish to take any medicine that uses human fingers as an ingredient."

Hell, neither do I!

Either way, it was actually strange that no punishment had been handed down for the problem child who had declared on a whim that he wouldn't do surgery. The surgery had been successful, and if the Emperor said that no punishment was to be meted out, then certainly none would be.

"Wait!" Maomao cried, realization dawning.

"What is it?"

"Er... Maybe it would be possible to dock that physician's pay instead of cutting off his fingers?"

"Dock his pay?"

"Yes, sir. For six months."

"Hmm. Yes, very well. I'll speak to Liu."

That meant it was as good as done. Maomao hadn't seen Tianyu for the last few days, but she suspected he was a little taller now—at least by the height of the bump raised by all the knuckles he'd been subjected to.

"I'll excuse myself, then," Maomao said.

"Hold on," replied the Emperor.

There's still something else? Maomao thought, trying to remember any other outbursts she might have had during the procedure.

"I simply have so much *time* on my hands here. Maybe you could bring me the textbook? The one that you presented at the rear palace?"

"The textbook? Ahh..."

He was talking about the "instruction manual" she'd given to the rear-palace consorts. She'd also offered it to him at one point.

"I'm afraid it might fall afoul of one of Dr. Liu's inspections," Maomao said.

"One of Liu's— Ahem. I think I ask for too much."

"Not at all, sir," Maomao said. Then she bowed and finally left the room.

Epilogue

After some two weeks, the Emperor resumed his public duties. His progress after the procedure was excellent, and there were no complications. Once Maomao had seen the stitches in the surgical site safely removed, she'd thrown up her hands for joy. And she wasn't the only one. Auntie Liu, Dr. Wang Wang, and the rest of the medical staff had been equally thrilled.

The postsurgical team had been looking after His Majesty in shifts, essentially without break.

"Argh! I'm going to find a street stall and get the greasiest noodles money can buy!" Wang Wang announced.

"Oooh," said Maomao.

Boy, do I know the feeling.

The single biggest issue with spending nights on call was food. They couldn't leave the rooms, so the Emperor's chefs generously made extra portions of his meals for them. Which would have been wonderful if he were having sumptuous royal fare, but he was on a recovery diet of congee without so much as rice in it. It was felt that the Emperor's doctors could hardly eat better than he did, so every meal that was presented to them was pathetic stuff like that. If Dr. Liu and Luomen hadn't smuggled in some snacks for them when they came to do their exams, the postsurgical team might have started to suffer from malnutrition.

Food time, food time!

Doctors would continue to take shifts for a while yet, but the postsurgical team as such was to be disbanded.

"It's such a shame. And just when we were getting along so well."

"Hee hee hee! Lady Suiren, we must take tea together sometime."

Suiren and Auntie Liu had grown thick as thieves, perhaps because they were so close in age.

Come to think of it...

Had Jinshi survived two weeks without Suiren?

“Now I suppose I’d better be getting back to looking after the younger young master,” Suiren said.

The older young master must be the Emperor.

In Maomao’s books, Suiren and the madam were the two most formidable old ladies she knew.

“Won’t you come eat something, Maomao? I hear Taomei and Maamei have made far too much for the young master to finish on his own.”

“Too much food?” Maomao asked, feeling herself start to salivate.

It would be a lot of trouble to go home now and still have to make her own meal. At the same time, it didn’t quite feel right to insist that her junior Changsha should cook for her. She’d been contemplating getting something from a street stall.

I do want to eat that food, but…

Suiren would be there, and Taomei, and Maamei—and, Maomao somehow suspected, Chue too.

Sounds pretty awkward.

She was just weighing a good meal against getting to relax a bit when Suiren whispered, “The young master seems rather tired. Perhaps you could take a look at him.”

Maomao simply answered, “Yes ma’am.”

With the Emperor on complete bed rest for two weeks, someone had had to step in to do the work.

“I tried to save you from as much work as I could, Moon Prince,” said Hulan, although his excuse didn’t carry much water. Jinshi was there, a dried-out husk of a man.

“If only my husband could have helped,” Taomei said, putting her hands to her cheeks and sighing. “But he’s had three times as much work as usual lately. In western-capital terms, it’s been an increase of fifty percent.”

If things had been busier than in the western capital, it was no surprise that Jinshi was wrung out.

He looks like a frog in a dried-up pond, Maomao thought—irreverent as ever.

“My, my, my, my, my.” No wonder Suiren looked less than happy: The carpet was plush, yes, but someone had walked on it without wiping their feet, and there was Jinshi, lying right there. “We need to at least carry him to bed.”

“I’m very sorry. He said to just leave him—that he couldn’t afford to sleep yet,” Basen said apologetically.

“*Doing* something about that situation is what followers are for! Xiaomao, let’s get to work,” Suiren said, wasting no time in making use of her. Maomao would have been just as happy to get some rest herself, but so it went.

“Could you make up some sugar water, for a start?” Maomao asked.

“I’m on it!”

The prompt reply came from Chue, who instantly produced a carafe.

“Here, Master Jinshi. Drink.” Maomao propped his head up and made him drink the sugar water.

After a moment of taking it in, Jinshi’s eyes snapped open. “Yurgh!” he exclaimed.

“‘Yurgh’? What’s that mean?” Maomao asked.

“Young Master, what crass behavior,” Suiren said gently.

“Master Jinshi, would you like something to eat?”

After a second he said, “Yeah...”

“And while you’re at it, perhaps you could bless me with a meal as well? I’m very, very hungry.”

“Eat your fill,” he replied.

“Thank you, sir.”

Then Jinshi realized he was in Maomao’s arms, and sat up, looking awkward.

“We’ll keep the food coming!” Taomei said as she and her daughter Maamei started producing a feast. The round table filled with food, and Maomao’s stomach growled.

“Miss Maomao, Miss Chue hopes you’ll leave enough for her,” Chue said—she was even hungrier than Maomao.

“You, over here,” said Taomei, grabbing Chue by the collar. “You look liable to eat this whole thing!”

“Noooo! My feast!”

Taomei dragged Chue off somewhere. It wasn’t just the two of them—Basen, Hulan, and Maamei likewise disappeared.

“Just call me if you need anything,” Suiren said. She set down a bell with which to summon her, and then went into another room.

“Sit,” Jinshi said. “Eat as much as you like.”

“You do the same, Master Jinshi.”

Jinshi smirked with his dry lips. “As long as you eat.”

With no one around, Jinshi didn't worry about his manners. He put his elbows on the table and stared at Maomao.

Well, he ordered me to eat, so...

She started with the noodles, which felt wonderful as they slid down her throat.

Jinshi didn't touch the food, but only watched her intently. Maybe he was still a bit dehydrated, because his gaze remained somewhat vacant, like he wasn't quite all there.

"I can't eat if you don't take some food too, sir," Maomao said.

"Right, yes." Jinshi clutched a bean bun in one hand and took a bite. What did we say? Bad manners.

"Master Jinshi. I can see you would die if you became emperor."

"A sudden prophecy of my demise?" he said.

"Yes, sir. You're totally unsuited for the throne." Maomao was exhausted too, and because there was no one else around, the disrespectful words came flooding from her.

"I see. I'm not suited to be emperor, you say?" Jinshi slurped some noodles, looking oddly happy.

"Please don't ever be one."

"I don't wish to."

"Are you going back to work after you eat?"

"Please don't speak of work. I want to at least relax during my meal."

"Yes, sir."

Their conversation, along with their meal, wound on slowly. Maomao should have been starving, but she found herself strangely sated, and her chopsticks moved at a glacial pace. Jinshi, likewise, started tearing little bits off the bean bun.

The feast gradually went cold, yet somehow they still enjoyed eating it.

It was, Maomao thought, an unusually serene moment.

The Apothecary Diaries

Introduction

The Name in the Forbidden Book

The *Apothecary Diaries* anime has been a huge hit, with a second season now in production.

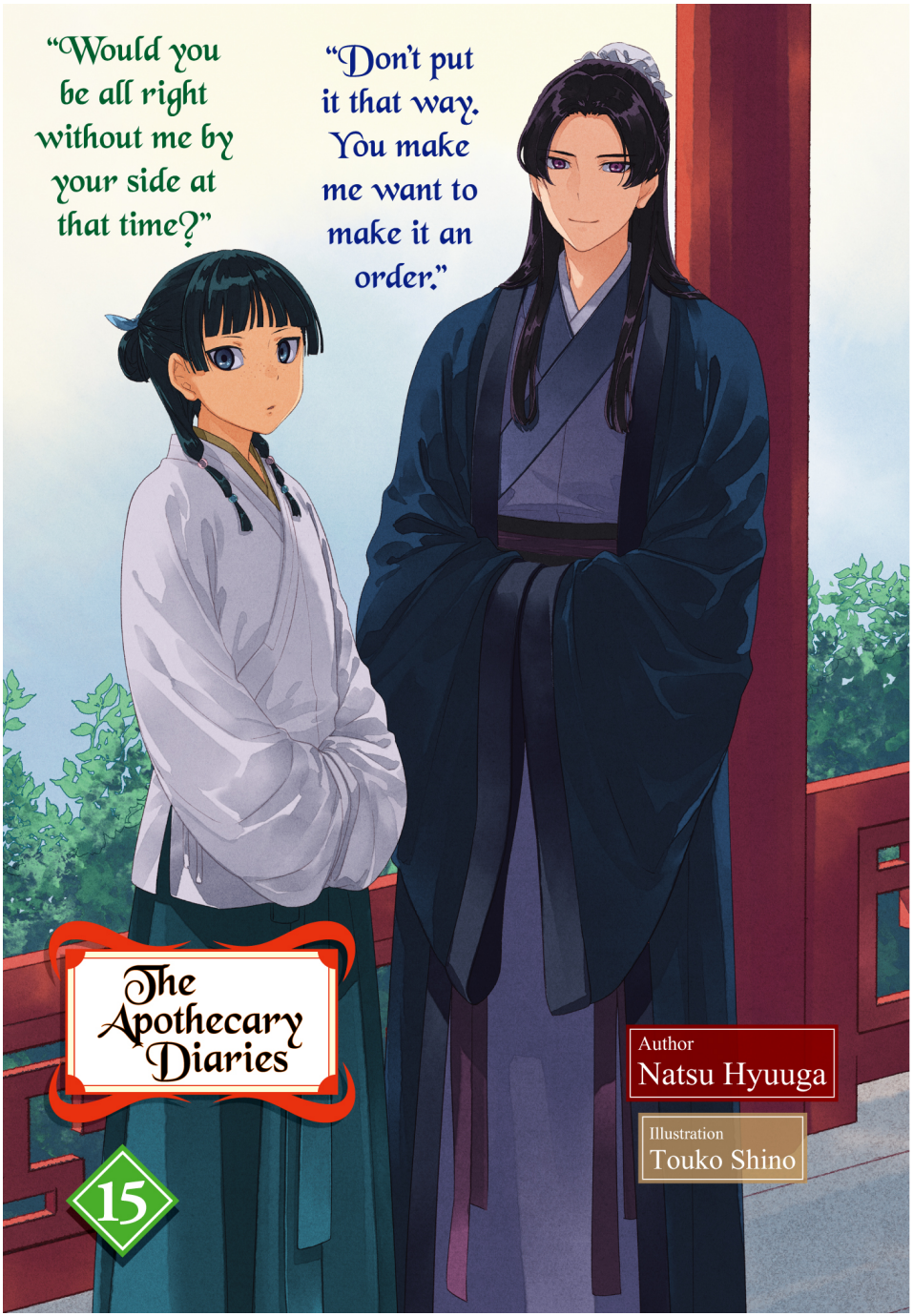
As for volume 15 of the novels, drug trials and surgery are key plot points. The physicians are gathered for large-scale drug trials, but why? And for whom?

Maomao may entertain those questions, but she can't ask them. The rest of the medical staff, as well, have a dim sense of what's going on, but no one dares say it out loud. They might realize that someone very important is very ill, but they all know that making that information public could shake the country to its core.

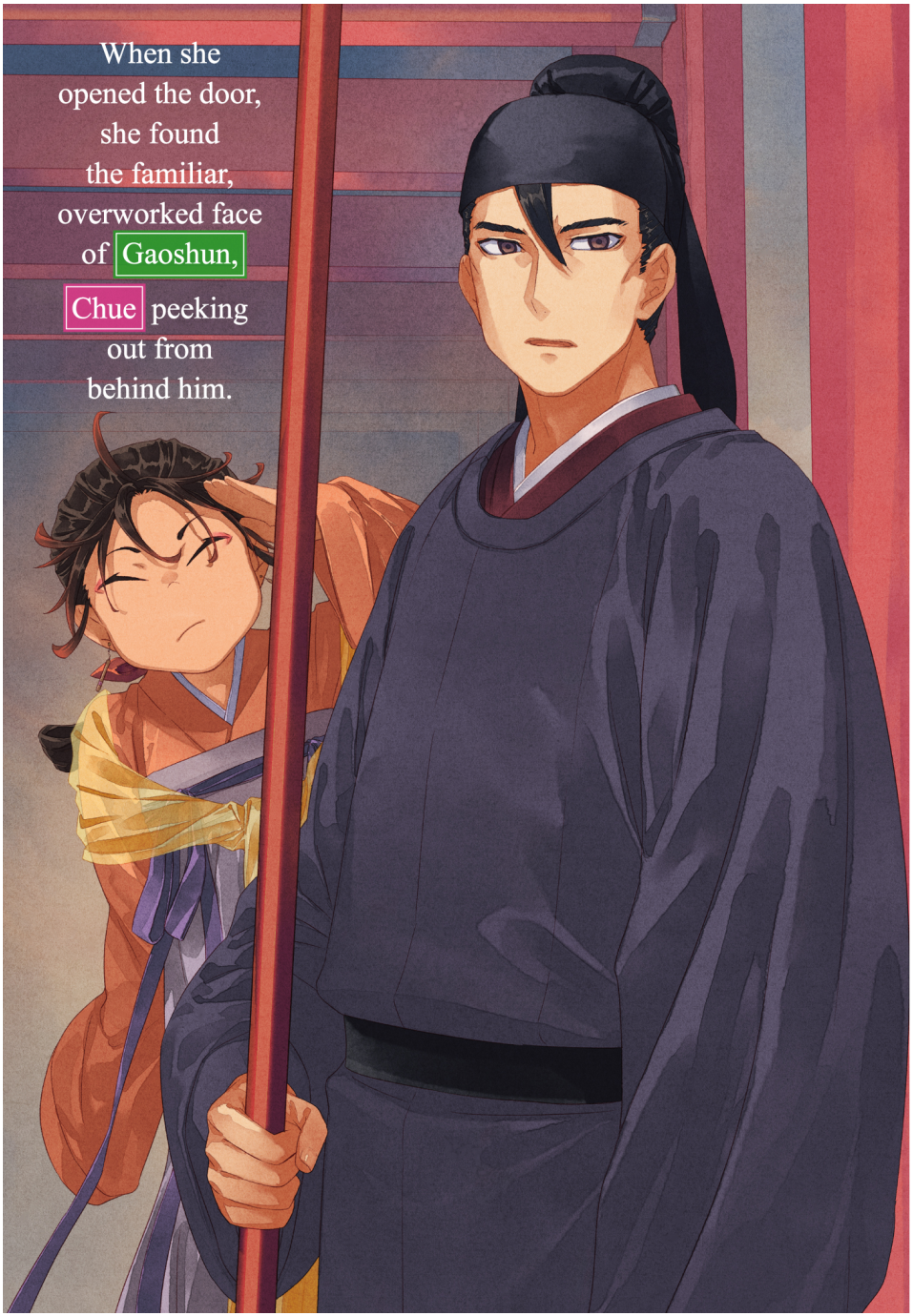
Meanwhile, Jinshi shows Maomao the reconstructed Kada's Book, and in its pages she sees a word she'll never forget: thornapple.

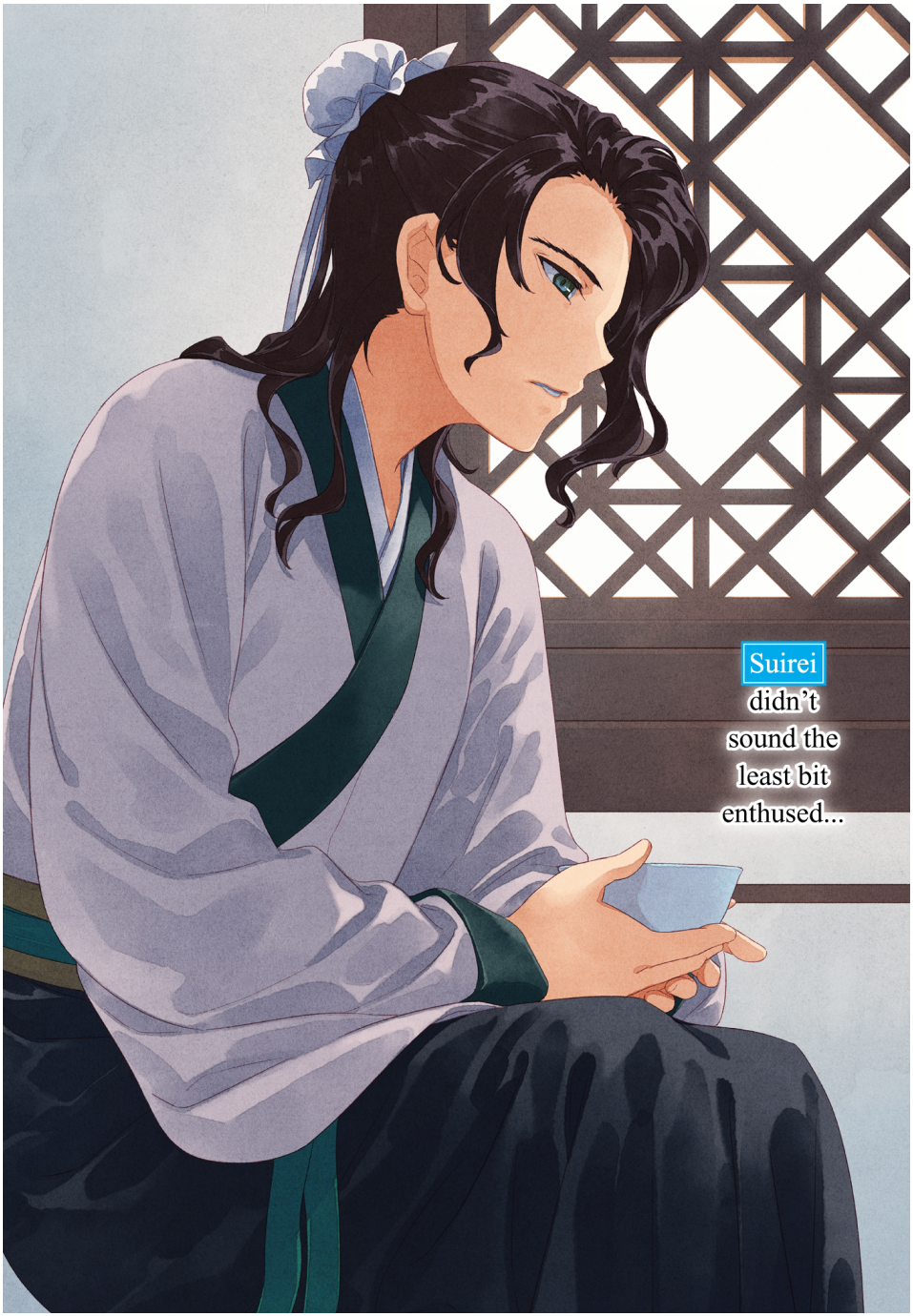
This plant looks like a morning glory, but it's an ingredient in one very particular, very secret drug...

Maomao immediately reached for the battered book, but Jinshi slapped her hand away.
Maomao went still for an instant, and then she exploded:
“Whhho-oooooa-aaaaa!”


"Would you be all right without me by your side at that time?"
"Don't put it that way. You make me want to make it an order."
The Apothecary Diaries
15
Author
Natsu Hyuuga
Illustration
Touko Shino

Luomen went and sat on a chair at the farthest end of the room, his cane clicking along with him.


When she opened the door, she found the familiar, overworked face of Gaoshun, Chue peeking out from behind him.


Suirei
didn't sound the least bit enthused...

“ Ah-Duo.
Do you resent me?”
“ Yoh.
Do you think I couldn't?”

Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

The Apothecary Diaries: Volume 15
by Natsu Hyuuga
Illustrations by Touko Shino

Translated by Kevin Steinbach
Edited by Sasha McGlynn

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Kusuriya No Hitorigoto
Copyright © Natsu Hyuuga 2024

All rights reserved.

Originally published in Japan by Shufunotomo Infos Co., Ltd.
Through Shufunotomo Co., Ltd.
This English edition is published by arrangement with Shufunotomo Co., Ltd., Tokyo
English translation © 2025 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: September 2025